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Allegiances

RIVERCLAN

Leader: Troutstar- grey tabby she-cat with green eyes

Deputy: Splashfall- black tom with blue eyes

Medicine cat: Streamswirl- white she-cat with ginger flecks and green eyes

Apprentice, Driftwater- dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Warriors:

Sprucejump- dark brown she-cat

Fishpatch- smoky grey tom with white belly

Apprentice, Tigerpaw

Toadleap- dark grey tom with white belly

Orangelake- speckled ginger she-cat

Frogskip- dark grey and white tom

Appleblossom- light golden-brown tabby she-cat

Waterheart- black tom with white tail tip

Apprentice, Mistypaw

Ambertail- dark orange she-cat with brown tail-tip and green eyes

Apprentice, Puddlepaw

Lizardwing- light brown tabby tom

Swallowflight- dark brown tabby she-cat

Pinewhisker- light brown tom with white paws and amber eyes

Wolfwhisper- very dark grey she-cat with brown legs

Seedfall- small ginger she-cat with blue eyes

Specklepelt- pale speckled grey tom with blue eyes

Pebbletooth- dark grey tom with lighter grey spots and green eyes

Cinderstream- light grey tabby she-cat

Eelfang- black she-cat

Apprentices:

Tigerpaw- dark ginger tabby tom

Mistypaw- light grey tabby she-cat

Puddlepaw- dark grey tabby tom with white paws

Queens:

Sweetmoss- light cream she-cat (expecting Waterheart's kits)

Elders:

Palestride- light grey tom

Ripplecloud- dark grey tom with light grey tabby stripes

WINDCLAN

Leader: Eveningstar- black tom with white flecks

Deputy: Sunleaf- orange and white she-cat

Medicine cat: Maplefur- red-brown mottled she-cat

Apprentice, Beeflight- ginger tom with black tabby stripes

Warriors:

Twistedfoot- black and white she-cat with a twisted forepaw

Dawnmist- grey she-cat

Palemist- light grey tabby she-cat

Cindercloud- light grey and white she-cat

Silvershine- silver tabby she-cat

Owlflight- brown tabby tom

Beetleclaw- black tabby tom

Juniperleaf- ginger she-cat

Apprentice, Blizzardpaw

Daisywhisper- white she-cat

Brightsun- light brown tabby she-cat

Eaglewing- brown and white tom

Lilyblossom- ginger and white she-cat

Icefang- white tom

Ashfleck- grey spotted tom

Willowfoot- tortoiseshell she-cat

Apprentice, Antpaw

Dustfall- dusky brown tabby tom

Nightfrost- black tom with amber eyes

Apprentice, Rapidpaw

Cherrystep- brown tabby she-cat

Pigeonfeather- light grey tom with fluffy fur

Smokefur- black tom

Leafstripe- grey tabby tom

Shellfoot- light grey she-cat

Specklepounce- speckled grey she-cat

Apprentices:

Rapidpaw- light brown tabby tom

Antpaw- white and brown tabby tom

Blizzardpaw- white she-cat

Queens:

Flowersong- golden-brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes (expecting Nightfrost's kits)

Elders:

Vinetail- white she-cat with black tabby stripes and a long tail

Stormstripe- grey tabby tom

THUNDERCLAN

Leader: Foxstar- dark brown tabby tom

Deputy: Marigoldfern- golden tabby she-cat

Medicine cat: Deermist- grey tabby she-cat

Warriors:

Thistlesight- black tabby tom with one blind eye

Redspark- red she-cat

Firespot- orange tabby tom with a spotted pelt

Emberflurry- dark orange she-cat

Antrunner- black and brown tabby tom

Apprentice, Blossompaw

Leafsting- white she-cat

Flintflash- grey long-haired tom

Rainglow- light grey tabby she-cat

Lionstrike- golden-brown tabby tom

Apprentice, Shortpaw

Doestep- light cream she-cat

Bluemist- dark grey she-cat

Stagfoot- black tabby tom

Brownfern- dark brown tabby she-cat

Jaggedleap- ginger tom

Stonewhisker- dark grey tom with short whiskers

Apprentices:

Shortpaw- small grey tom

Blossompaw- tawny she-cat

Queens:

Mothstrike- light brown tabby she-cat (mother to Stagfoot's kits)

(Kits: Dewkit, Nutkit)

Elders:

Wildbush- brown tom

Beechstep- light grey tabby tom

SHADOWCLAN

Leader: Kestrelstar- brown tabby tom

Deputy: Hazelclaw- dark brown she-cat

Medicine cat: Snowpatch- grey tom with white patches

Warriors:

Bearpounce- black tabby tom

Mudpuddle- dark brown tabby tom

Curledfur- sandy she-cat with curly fur

Apprentice, Darkpaw

Prickleberry- dark grey tabby tom

Apprentice, Wasppaw

Rainwillow- light grey and white tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Bluewater- blue-grey she-cat

Hailfall- white tom with brown patches

Rustpelt- dark ginger she-cat

Apprentice, Runningpaw

Batflight- black she-cat

Flashstep- grey and black tabby tom

Apprentices:

Darkpaw- dark grey tabby tom

Wasppaw- grey and black tabby she-cat

Runningpaw- brown and grey she-cat

Queens:

Dovetooth- white tabby she-cat (expecting Mudpuddle's kits)

Elders:

Clovershade- tawny she-cat

Chapter One

[image]

Ambertail fought to catch her breath as she raced away from the foxes trying to bite into her fur. Her apprentice, Puddlepaw, could only just keep up with her, and she was tempted to grab the grey tabby tom by the scruff and carry him herself.

Sprucejump and Frogskip, the other cats of her patrol, ran just in front of them. Ambertail's heart skipped a beat as she realised the senior warriors were leading the two foxes right towards the camp.

"We need to change direction!" she called out, "We're taking them to the camp!"

"We'll lead them away!" Sprucejump shouted back over her shoulder. "You and Puddlepaw warn the Clan!"

Ambertail managed a nod, and she turned to look at Puddlepaw. "Jump to the side on three!" she instructed him. "One! Two! Three!"

Ambertail leaped to the right, landing face first in a bush. Its branches whipped her face, but she was relieved as she heard the thundering of paw steps continuing to race in the opposite direction, away from the RiverClan camp.

When she was sure the coast was clear, she pushed her way out of the bush and looked around for Puddlepaw.

Did a fox snatch him? She thought worriedly.

Her worries were put to rest as her apprentice staggered out of the long grass in front of her. Blood was dripping from his hind leg where a fox had bitten him, and his eyelids looked heavy with exhaustion.

"Let's get you back to camp," she mewed. Puddlepaw slowly nodded his head and followed Ambertail through the territory to their

camp. Ambertail's ear started to sting as they walked, and she realised that one of the foxes must have nicked it with their claws.

She led Puddlepaw across the stepping stones to the camp carefully, making sure he didn't slip into the stream. His wounded hind leg was too weak to bear his weight much longer, though, and it gave out underneath him. Ambertail quickly stretched her neck out and clamped his scruff in her teeth. He cried out in terror as his hind legs fell into the stream and the icy cold water surrounded his bleeding wound.

Ambertail, mustering all of her strength, hauled him back up onto the stone. He was almost as big as her, and pulling him up took most of her remaining energy.

"Come on, the camp is just through the reeds," Ambertail meowed drowsily. Puddlepaw nodded and the two slowly made their way back to camp.

As Ambertail pushed past the reeds and entered the camp, Toadleap raced up to her and Puddlepaw.

"What happened?" he asked, worry filling his eyes. A moment later, Appleblossom was by his side, and covering Puddlepaw in licks.

"Foxes," Ambertail breathed wearily.

Toadleap gasped sharply, and Appleblossom wrapped her tail protectively around Puddlepaw, her son.

"I need to talk to Troutstar," Ambertail uttered, pushing past the fretting parents. She scrambled through the bramble thicket that Troutstar's den was located in, and stood just in the entrance. She cleared her throat to get her leader's attention, not having enough energy to talk. Streamswirl, their medicine cat, stood over Troutstar, helping the weak leader eat some herbs. Streamswirl had confided in Ambertail that the leader was suffering from a disease that was destroying her body from the inside, but not even the experienced medicine cat could figure out what it was. All the rest of the Clan knew was that their leader was sick and nest-bound.

"Who is it?" Troutstar croaked out weakly, barely able to lift her head to see the visitor.

"It's Ambertail," Streamswirl told the leader, "aren't you meant to be on patrol?" the medicine cat asked, turning back to the orange warrior.

"That's why I'm here," Ambertail started, "we came across foxes near the ShadowClan border and they started attacking us, probably to protect their den," Ambertail explained, straining to talk as she was still exhausted from running. "Two of them. Sprucejump and Frogskip led them away from camp, but I'm not sure how long they can keep running for."

Troutstar quickly buried her face in her nest, her body wracked with a painful coughing spasm. Ambertail managed to catch a better glimpse at the leader's body; she was scrawny and weak, Ambertail could see Troutstar's ribs protruding out, and she looked like her body would just give out at any moment.

Once the leader regained her composure, she looked at Ambertail with a weary, thoughtful look. "Okay, I'll send-"

"Foxes!"

The three cats whipped their heads to the entrance of the den, and, after exchanging a scared glance, Ambertail and Streamswirl raced out of the bramble thicket and into the main clearing of the camp.

Dread flooded through Ambertail as she saw the two foxes she managed to escape were crashing through the camp, directly behind Sprucejump and Frogskip, who looked exhausted. The warriors were all huddled to the ground, watching the foxes fearfully. Waterheart stood protectively in front of the nursery, hissing at one of the foxes, and Seedfall and Specklepelt were both protecting the medicine den.

Ambertail's spine tingled with horror as she saw Puddlepaw lying helplessly in the middle of the camp. Toadleap and Appleblossom were both trying to help him stand up, but he could barely keep his eyes open.

Ambertail bunched up her muscles, getting ready to spring on a fox to protect her apprentice, but stopped as a flash of black pounced on a fox hovering above Puddlepaw. It was Splashfall, the deputy, and Ambertail's father.

She watched as Waterheart joined the deputy and leaped at the other fox, clawing at its ears. Ambertail could hardly watch, and was horrified to see the rest of the warriors were still sitting idly by, protecting themselves instead of their Clan.

Well I'm not just going to sit here! Ambertail told herself. She raced across the camp and grabbed Puddlepaw's scruff. Appleblossom smiled gratefully at her, and the three cats pulled the apprentice to the side where his den was located.

When she knew her apprentice was safe, she turned back to the foxes. A lump formed in her throat as she saw one of the red creatures throw Waterheart to the ground.

"No!" Ambertail cried, charging towards the fox. She jumped on it from behind and bit one of its hind legs, digging her teeth as far in as she could. The fox yelped and kicked her off, sending her crashing to the ground.

Pain seared through her back, but she pushed herself to her paws. To her relief, Waterheart was by her side in a few moments, having quickly gotten back to his paws, and the tom helped her keep the fox away from their Clanmates. She slashed its muzzle and he swiped at its belly, and soon, the fox was racing out of the camp, followed by its companion. She saw that Specklepelt and another one of her Clanmates, Pinewhisker had jumped into the fight to help chase off the other fox, as one of Pinewhisker's ears now had a deep tear down it.

"Is everyone okay?" Ambertail called out to the camp. The warriors were tentatively standing up and licking their fur flat, but for the most part, no one was badly hurt. A few cats mumbled replies, but most of them just nodded. Pinewhisker tentatively stepped towards Ambertail, the somber look on his face gave her a deep sense of dread.

He sighed. "Ambertail, it's...it's Splashfall. He couldn't, I mean, he-" Pinewhisker stuttered, not knowing how to get the words out. Ambertail shook her head.

"No, no! He can't be..." Her words trailed off as she turned around to see a black pile of fur amidst a clump of reeds at the edge of the camp, with Specklepelt sitting beside him and rasping his tongue over the deputy's flank. "Splashfall!" she cried out, racing over to him.

His black flank rose and fell slowly, and his breathing was nothing but a shallow rasping. A large gash was scored down the side of his neck down to his belly. The usually sturdy and strong looking deputy was reduced to nothing but a scrap of black fur. Ambertail pushed her nose into his fur, trying to stay strong in front of him.

"I'm not losing you," she whimpered, looking directly into his blue eyes. "I can't lose you as well." Not waiting for him to reply, she buried her muzzle back into his sleek fur, which was now crusted with blood. She could tell he was trying to speak, but all that he could muster was a soft grunt.

Ambertail finally lifted her head to look at Splashfall again; his eyes were flickering shut and his breathing was steadily slowing down.

"Streamswirl! Streamswirl I need you!" Ambertail called the medicine cat desperately. She looked frantically around, her eyes darting from Clanmate to Clanmate, until her gaze landed on the white-and-ginger she-cat. The medicine cat looked up from tending to Waterheart and her eyes flooded with grief as she saw Splashfall lying in the reeds.

"Just hold on," Ambertail told her father. "Streamswirl is going to help you."

"Amber...Ambertail," Splashfall groaned, straining to keep his eyes open as he gazed at his daughter. "I can see StarClan, it's my time. I'm so proud of the warrior you've become."

He took a long shuddering breath, and his eyes fluttered shut. His flank was still rising and falling, even though his breathing was

almost non-existent.

As Ambertail looked away, not able to bear watching her father join StarClan, Streamswirl was by her side, sniffing at Splashfall's wounds.

"I'm sorry, Ambertail, he's gone," the medicine cat told Ambertail solemnly.

The orange warrior held back a mournful wail as her eyes rested upon Splashfall's unmoving body. She quickly turned around, not able to look at him anymore, to find that the entire Clan was watching her, their eyes full of sorrow. She began to feel slightly embarrassed and awkward, as if the Clan was expecting her to start crying out with emotion.

Ambertail flinched as a tail suddenly settled on her shoulder. She looked to her side; Streamswirl was smiling sympathetically at her. The medicine cat seemed to be holding back her grief as well, but she rasped her tongue along Ambertail's ear to comfort her.

"He was a respected warrior and deputy," Streamswirl told Ambertail, keeping eye contact. "We will all miss him dearly."

Ambertail's gaze fell back to her paws, and she focused on a blade of grass sprouting from the ground. She was trying so hard not to let her emotions get the better of her. But it was hard. Each breath she took was weak and shuddering.

Driftwater, Streamswirl's apprentice, soon came over to join his mentor. "We should move Splashfall into the middle of the clearing," he mewed quietly.

Ambertail watched in silence as the two medicine cats hauled the deputy's body away from the reeds and into the clearing where the rest of the Clan could cluster around him and mourn the loss of their deputy together.

Ambertail sat beside her father's head, rasping her tongue over his ear slowly and gently. She jumped in fright when large coughing echoed from Troutstar's den.

"Oh no," Ambertail heard Streamswirl breath. "Troutstar!"

The medicine cat whipped around and raced into the leader's den, quickly followed by Driftwater. The rest of the Clan all looked at each other anxiously, not knowing if their leader could survive much longer. Ambertail quietly stepped towards the leader's den, straining her ears to hear what was being said.

"Troutstar." That was Streamswirl's anxious voice. "Splashfall is dead, you need to appoint a new deputy now! I don't think your body can take this illness much longer!"

The only response was a strained inhale from Troutstar.

"I'm begging you, please! Just a name, just tell me one warrior's name and I'll go speak to StarClan to appoint them!" Ambertail could tell Streamswirl was on the verge of breaking down. "Please." The medicine cat's voice softened, and Ambertail wished she could be in there to comfort her friend and leader.

One last cough erupted from the den, then silence fell upon the camp. A few moments later, Streamswirl and Driftwater slowly padded out of the den, their heads hanging. The Clan immediately surrounded them, questions flying around.

"Well?"

"What did she say?"

"Is Troutstar okay?"

Streamswirl finally lifted her head to face them all. "Troutstar...succumbed to her disease. She couldn't fight it anymore." Streamswirl looked away again. "She's gone."

Dread flooded over Ambertail again, her head started spinning and she felt like she was going to collapse.

"Did she appoint a new deputy before she died?" Lizardwing asked. His expression was confused, but there was a flash of fear in his eyes.

"No," Driftwater spoke up, allowing Streamswirl to sit for a moment, "she was too weak to manage any words. There is no new deputy."

"But, if both the leader and deputy are dead," Lizardwing interjected, staring at his Clanmates. "Who will succeed Troutstar now?"

Chapter Two

The Clan was in turmoil; everyone was yelling over each other, all freaking out.

"Who will be the next leader?!"

"How will the next leader be chosen?!"

"Why, StarClan?!"

Ambertail's thoughts raced. What was the Clan going to do without a leader or a deputy? Ambertail's head started to hurt with all of the yelling around her.

I think I need to go to the medicine den, she thought. *Wait...medicine!*

"Everyone quiet!" she screamed over the commotion.

The voices died down quickly, and everyone turned to face Ambertail with expectant looks.

"Streamswirl should be in charge of choosing the new leader," Ambertail stated firmly. "She has the strongest connection with StarClan out of all of us, and as a medicine cat, she has more authority than we do as warriors."

"Ambertail is right," Appleblossom meowed over the whispers. "Streamswirl should be in charge until we have a leader."

Fishpatch stepped forward, his grey fur bristling. "It sounds like Ambertail thinks she's in charge now just because Splashfall was her father, why should we have to listen to her?"

Ambertail's tail flicked in annoyance. She didn't think she was in charge, nor did she *want* to be in charge.

"That's not true!" she defended herself, keeping her fur flat.

"Well what do you think, Streamswirl?" Appleblossom asked the medicine cat.

Ambertail turned to look at Streamswirl; the medicine cat looked very uncomfortable with everyone arguing, and gave Ambertail a pleading look.

"I-I don't know," Streamswirl mewed, looking down at her paws.

"This is ridiculous!" Waterheart growled. "Of course Streamswirl should be in charge for now! You can be our temporary leader until you choose a leader. If that's okay with you, that is."

Ambertail could see the panic flooding Streamswirl's green eyes. She wished she had never said anything. Streamswirl was one of her best friends, and she knew that the medicine cat hated conflict. Ambertail quickly padded over to her, and wrapped her tail around the medicine cat.

"I'm sorry I said anything, it's up to you," she told her friend. Streamswirl hesitated for a moment, before looking out over her Clanmates.

"No," she meowed determinedly. "You're right. I accept this honour and will serve as RiverClan's temporary leader until I choose one."

As soon as the medicine cat had finished speaking, the Clan erupted into shouts again. A couple of warriors declared that they would make great leaders, others saying that the Clan was doomed.

Ambertail could feel the panic of all of RiverClan rising.

"How can we protect our kits if we have no leader?" Sweetmoss called out from the entrance of the nursery.

"We *will* have a leader!" Streamswirl called over everyone.

The noise stopped instantly and everyone faced the medicine cat, who was standing on the Great Stump, where the leader would stand to make an announcement.

"I promise you all, we *will* have a leader, you all just need to trust

me," Streamswirl growled.

"But the warrior code says that a new deputy must be appointed by moonhigh if the previous one dies!" Pebbletooth called out anxiously, his eyes widened with worry.

Ambertail could see the panic in Streamswirl's eyes, but the medicine cat remained calm. "That is a code for the leader to follow," she meowed, seeming to pick her words very carefully. "As I am not a leader, I don't think that applies here."

Cats were still murmuring to themselves, but no one argued.

"What will we say at the Gathering tomorrow night?" Cinderstream asked nervously, her light grey fur standing on end.

"I will stand in place of the leader for tomorrow," Streamswirl explained, "and I will inform the Clans of our tragedy."

Driftwater, Streamswirl's apprentice, stepped forward. "We need to have faith in our warrior ancestors that they will show us the way. Streamswirl knows what she's doing," he reassured his Clanmates.

Ambertail had faith in her friend; Streamswirl had never let the Clan down before and she wasn't going to start now. Ambertail just needed to have patience.

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Ambertail felt nervousness prick at her paws as the RiverClan patrol crossed the tree-bridge to the Island. How would the Clans react? Would they take this as an opportunity to invade RiverClan, or would they be respectful and leave the Clan alone as they tried to find a new leader?

Ambertail drew in the scents flooding through the reeds as she pushed her way into the clearing, and determined that ShadowClan and ThunderClan had already arrived.

As her Clan entered the clearing, she could see Kestrelstar and Foxstar both waiting under the large tree, and their medicine cats and deputies pacing around them.

Who is Streamswirl going to sit with? Ambertail wondered.

She took a deep breath and sat down, trying not to worry about the fact that her Clan was vulnerable and all the other Clans would know that.

Paw steps behind her told Ambertail that someone was walking up to her.

"Hey, Ambertail," a voice meowed behind her.

Ambertail turned around and saw Redspark from ThunderClan smiling at her alongside Bluewater, a ShadowClan warrior.

"Hi Redspark, Bluewater," Ambertail replied nervously.

"Are you okay?" Bluewater asked. "I noticed that Troutstar isn't here."

"Yeah, neither is Splashfall," Redspark mewed, looking around. "Is everything okay in RiverClan?"

Ambertail looked down at her paws as she scored marks in the ground with her claws.

"Everything is...fine," she finally told them. They could find out with the rest of the Clans what was wrong.

The scent of WindClan bathed Ambertail's tongue, and she turned around to see Eveningstar leading his Clan.

"The Gathering is going to begin soon," Ambertail commented, looking back to the front where the leaders were waiting for the last leader to jump up onto the tree branches.

Eveningstar quickly joined them, and the three leaders all jumped up, looking around in confusion when Troutstar did not join them. Their expressions became even more confused when Streamswirl joined them on one of the lowest branches.

"Let-let the Gathering begin!" Kestrelstar yowled, uncertainty in his voice.

The cats of all Clans sat down quickly, all of them staring at the RiverClan medicine cat.

"Would you like to speak first, Streamswirl?" Foxstar asked, his ears perked and tail swishing with curiosity.

Streamswirl dipped her head to the ThunderClan leader and stepped forward.

"The reason I am here in place of Troutstar, is because she tragically died battling a disease she has suffered with for moons," the medicine cat explained.

Gasps came from the cats gathered in the clearing, and murmurs of apologies for RiverClan could be heard. Ambertail felt Redspark stiffen beside her.

"Has Splashfall been made leader?" Eveningstar asked, his eyes round. "Was he unable to come tonight?"

"Splashfall was killed by a group of invading foxes from the ShadowClan border, and RiverClan has no leader, so I will be acting as leader until one is chosen," Streamswirl meowed confidently.

"On behalf of ShadowClan, I am so sorry for your loss," Kestrelstar mewed kindly. "If you'd like, I can help choose a new leader."

"Yes," Foxstar agreed. "As leaders, we have experience choosing a cat who would make the best leader and-"

"No!" Streamswirl shouted. "You doubt my intuition as medicine cat, and my connection with StarClan. I don't need help from you, I can choose for myself, thank you very much," she growled, pride glowing in her eyes.

Ambertail felt proud of her friend for standing up for her Clan, and for interrupting Foxstar. She had always thought the ThunderClan leader was incredibly arrogant.

"I'm so sorry, I did not mean to offend you," Kestrelstar apologised.

"It's quite alright, Kestrelstar," Streamswirl mewed, a few hairs still

bristling. "I will travel to the Moonpool after the Gathering tonight and consult with StarClan."

"ThunderClan will be here for you in this troubled time," Foxstar meowed, dipping his head to the medicine cat.

"Thank you, Foxstar. That is all." Streamswirl took a step back and allowed the next leader to speak.

"I'm so sorry," Bluewater whispered in Ambertail's ear. "I had no idea."

"It wasn't your fault, it's okay," Ambertail replied, sweeping her tail around her paws.

Redspark placed her tail on Ambertail's shoulder. Ambertail felt comforted and she gave the ThunderClan warrior a friendly smile. She knew that Streamswirl would choose the perfect cat to be leader. She just had to remember that.

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Ambertail fought to keep her eyes open. It was nearly dawn and she had stayed up guarding the camp all night with Pinewhisker.

When they had returned home from the Gathering the previous night, Driftwater had suggested that two cats guard the camp that night while Streamswirl was away at the Moonpool, as the other Clans knew that they were vulnerable. Ambertail was the first cat to volunteer; she wanted to be the first one to greet Streamswirl when she returned.

"Hey, wake up," Pinewhisker's soft voice whispered beside Ambertail's ear.

She jerked her head up, her eyes quickly opening, and looked around. She must have fallen asleep on her paws for a moment.

"Sorry, I'm just really tired." Ambertail shook her head to keep herself awake. Pinewhisker let out a small chuckle.

"You can go back to your nest if you want, it's nearly sunup," he

meowed.

"No, I chose to guard the camp until Streamswirl gets back, so I will," Ambertail stated firmly.

Pinewhisker flashed her a sympathetic smile. His ears twitched suddenly and he turned to look into the distance.

Ambertail followed his gaze and saw a silhouette in the mist. She couldn't make out the pelt colour but she could tell by the size of the cat and the way they were moving that it was Streamswirl.

"Streamswirl!" Ambertail cried out excitedly. She bounded over to her friend but her happiness turned into concern when she realised that the medicine cat was staggering and was about to fall over.

"Are you okay? What happened?" Ambertail asked worriedly, letting the tired cat rest on her shoulder.

Streamswirl sighed deeply. "StarClan was no help. They told me that I would be able to figure it out on my own, and I'm so tired," she breathed. "I don't know what to do."

"Surely you have an idea of who to choose?" Pinewhisker meowed, tilting his head to the side.

"Well, I do have one idea on *how* to choose someone," Streamswirl admitted hesitantly.

"What is it?" Ambertail pressed.

Streamswirl seemed to think for a moment, then she bounded into camp, her energy suddenly returning. She jumped up on the tree stump from which Troutstar always made announcements and called out to the Clan.

"All cats old enough to swim in the stream gather for a Clan meeting!"

Ambertail watched as warriors and apprentices pushed their way out of their dens, their eyes bleary with sleep. Driftwater burst out of the medicine cats' den and raced over to Streamswirl. He started

talking with Streamswirl worriedly, but Ambertail couldn't make out anything he was saying. Driftwater dipped his head to his mentor and stepped back to the Clan.

"I wonder what she's going to do," Ambertail whispered to Pinewhisker. The light brown tom just shrugged.

"Cats of RiverClan!" Streamswirl began. "I have gathered you here to tell you of how the new leader will be chosen!"

"Did StarClan tell you who to choose?" Pebbletooth called. His green eyes were round with anxiety.

"StarClan was no help to me," Streamswirl said softly. "I must make this decision myself."

Cats around Ambertail started whispering to each other.

"I wonder who she'll choose."

"StarClan didn't tell her? That's strange."

Ambertail turned to Pinewhisker. "Maybe she chose on her way back," she suggested.

"Maybe," Pinewhisker mewed, looking around at his Clanmates.

Streamswirl cleared her throat to get everyone's attention.

"I will hold a competition to find out who is fit to be leader."

Gasps escaped from every cats mouth, including Ambertail's.

"A new challenge will be completed every day, and only warriors who have trained an apprentice will be allowed to compete."

"That's not fair!" Specklepelt growled, his grey fur bristling.

"It's perfectly fair. As stated in the warrior code, only a warrior who has mentored an apprentice can be appointed as deputy, so the same rules apply."

The Clan was completely silent with shock. Ambertail's whiskers

twitched anxiously.

"First challenge is tomorrow at sunhigh," Streamswirl informed them. "Any warrior that wishes to compete must be ready in the clearing."

Ambertail looked down at her paws. *I might not make the best leader,* she thought, *but I'll give it my best shot.*

Chapter Three

Ambertail sat in the clearing of the camp, her heart thumping in her chest. Nerves gripped her from head to tail-tip.

"Why can't I compete?" Puddlepaw asked her, tilting his head to the side.

"Because you're an apprentice," Ambertail chuckled. "You can't be leader."

Puddlepaw looked down, crestfallen. "Well, I hope you win!" he meowed, looking back up at his mentor. "You'd make a great leader!"

Ambertail was touched that her own apprentice wanted her to be his leader. She opened her mouth, ready to thank him, but was cut off by a snort beside her.

"Oh, please," Lizardwing huffed. "I'd be a much better leader."

Ambertail's tail lashed from side to side in frustration, but she didn't argue. There was no use starting a fight with him, then *both* of them might be eliminated.

Ambertail looked around, trying to calm her nerves; Ripplecloud and Palestride sat outside the elders' den, gossiping with each other. Swallowflight and Wolfwhisper padded out of the warriors' den, the latter looking particularly nervous. Swallowflight seemed to be trying to calm her down. Other warriors were pacing around, mumbling to themselves.

Ambertail looked up at the sky; grey clouds covered the sun, but she could tell that it was indeed sunhigh. She whipped her head around as she heard movement from the medicine cats' den, but sighed when she realised it was just Driftwater. The dark tabby padded towards the group of cats gathered, and stood at the front of the crowd, not saying anything.

Moments later, Ambertail saw Streamswirl emerge from her den and jump up onto the Great Stump.

"Every cat that wishes to compete, step forward," she called to the crowd.

Ambertail sat back for a moment, observing every cat that stood up; Lizardwing was the first to push himself to his feet, quickly followed by Sprucejump and Fishpatch. Waterheart eagerly stood up, his tail lashing, then Toadleap, Orangelake and Frogskip jumped up. Appleblossom stood up hesitantly, looking around at the other warriors. The last to stand up were Pinewhisker and Swallowflight.

Ambertail nearly forgot to stand up, but quickly sprang to her paws when she felt Puddlepaw jab her in the side.

Streamswirl looked out at the warriors that were standing, until her gaze rested on Wolfwhisper, who was still sitting down. The medicine cat gave her a confused look.

"Don't you wish to compete, Wolfwhisper?" the medicine cat asked.

Wolfwhisper looked down at her paws, then back up at Streamswirl. Ambertail could see her tail quivering.

"I would love to," the dark grey she-cat meowed, "but I'm expecting kits." Her eyes lit up at the end of her sentence.

"Congratulations!" Streamswirl exclaimed. Everyone else gave the she-cat a quick congratulations, then looked back up at Streamswirl.

"You may move to the nursery as soon as you wish," Streamswirl told her. "The rest of you that are competing, come to the front."

Ambertail followed the stream of cats padding to the front, and stood between Pinewhisker and Appleblossom.

Streamswirl looked out at her Clanmates. "Your first challenge is this."

Ambertail held her breath, hoping it wasn't something too hard.

"Hunting," Streamswirl announced.

That's so easy! Ambertail thought. Looking around, she figured that most other warriors agreed that it was easy by the confident expressions on their faces.

"You will have to catch as much prey as possible, and then there will be an alarm for you to stop; all the cats left in the camp will yowl, and I'm sure everyone will hear it," Streamswirl explained.

"How much time do we get?" Waterheart called to the medicine cat.

"However long I decide," she meowed coolly. "Go!"

Ambertail nearly fell over her paws as she scrambled to her feet. Cats pushed past her in haste, and she was almost trampled under the mass of warriors.

Finally, she leaped to her feet and raced out if camp. The thrumming of her Clanmates' paw steps echoed in her ears.

All the prey will be gone if they keep up this noise!

She stopped for a moment, listening and scenting her Clanmates. *They're all heading for the river,* she concluded.

Figuring that most of the space by the river would be taken up, she decided to use her land hunting skills. She veered away from the river and starting heading in the direction of ShadowClan's territory, where the forestation was much denser.

Pushing her way through a small clump of holly bushes, she opened her mouth and drew in all the scents around her. Faint ShadowClan scent was in the air, but the scent of mouse and shrew was much more prominent.

Ambertail adopted the hunter's crouch and stalked forwardly slowly, carefully watching where she placed her paws. She could hear a small creature snuffling around at the bottom of a tree, and turning the corner, she saw a little grey mouse among the fallen red leaves, nibbling on a nut. Making sure she was downwind of it, she crept forward. Her paw steps were precise and, when she was close

enough to the mouse, she leaped forward, landing squarely on top of it. Leaning down, she dealt it the killing bite.

"One caught, but there are others around," she mumbled to herself.

Holding the mouse by its tail, she continued to search the undergrowth for more prey. She soon scented a shrew, and managed to kill it swiftly. Just as she was about to grab it to find more, she was startled by a rustling in the bushes just past the border. Looking through the trees, she just managed to make out the shapes of three ShadowClan warriors coming her way.

"I heard noises over here," a husky voice growled.

"It's probably just a bird, Prickleberry," a softer voice responded.

Even though Ambertail was on her side of the border, fear gripped her. It would look suspicious to the ShadowClan warriors if she was hunting this close to the border by herself.

Grabbing her prey, she dived into a nearby bramble bush, its thorns piercing her pelt. She could see the warriors step up to the border and start marking their scent. She recognised them as Prickleberry, Bluewater and Flashstep.

She watched as Prickleberry stepped right up to the border and start scenting the air.

"There's fresh RiverClan scent and fresh prey scent," he remarked.

"Well I can't see anyone," Flashstep hissed.

"Does it really matter?" Bluewater asked. "They're allowed to hunt on their own land, there are no scents over the border, let's just go."

The blue-grey she-cat started to walk away, and was quickly joined by her two Clanmates, Prickleberry growling under his breath as he left.

When Ambertail knew they were gone, she heaved a breath of relief. Wincing, she pulled herself out of the bush.

"That took up too much of my time," she hissed. "I need to find more prey quickly."

She hurried out of the undergrowth until she was back on more clear land, and rushed through the territory while scenting the air. She came to a sudden halt as she saw a thrush flutter down onto the ground, unware of her.

Carefully placing her fresh-kill down, she stalked forward quietly. She was only a tail-length away from it when a blur of light brown fur flashed in front of her and killed the thrush. She stared in astonishment as Lizardwing picked up the bird and smirked at her.

"You snooze, you lose," he gloated through the feathers.

"That was my fresh-kill!" Ambertail growled indignantly.

"Mine now," Lizardwing huffed and raced off.

Ambertail's whiskers quivered with fury. That was her thrush! She was so close, then Lizardwing swooped in and took it! That was unfair, and that was *not* a quality a leader should have.

Anger surging through her, Ambertail pelted through the territory, her fresh-kill swinging in her jaws, towards the river. The only way for her to catch up now was to fish.

When she reached the river, she immediately saw Appleblossom and Fishpatch sitting by the water, and further downstream she spotted Orangelake and Waterheart. Keeping her distance from the rest of her Clanmates, she sat down and dropped her fresh-kill beside her. She stared intently into the water, waiting for a fish to swim by. It seemed like forever until she saw a flash of sliver scales in the water. She quickly swatted the fish out of the stream and killed it with a bite to the head.

She looked back down at the water, hoping to catch another, but her spirits fell as soon as she heard a loud yowling emanating from the camp.

No! I've only got three pieces of fresh-kill, she cried inwardly.

Disheartened, she grabbed her three pieces in her mouth and wandered back to camp. Most of the other warriors were already there, but Sprucejump entered the camp just after Ambertail.

Streamswirl was sitting on the Great Stump, looking out at the Clan. "You have had your time to hunt, now we must find the cat to be eliminated," she told the Clan firmly.

Ambertail looked around, desperately hoping that someone had less prey than her. She couldn't be eliminated in the first challenge, shed never get the chance to prove herself.

"Did anyone catch nothing?" Streamswirl questioned. No one replied. "One piece of fresh-kill?"

Ambertail prayed that someone would speak up. Nothing.

"Two pieces?"

"Yes," a soft voice answered.

Ambertail turned around to see Appleblossom standing up, her head hanging. Her light golden fur seemed to be spiked up with anxiety. Ambertail looked down at the two fish the she-cat had managed to catch. She gazed back up at Streamswirl, whose eyes were clouded sadly.

"I'm sorry to say Appleblossom, but you are eliminated from the competition," the medicine cat mewed kind-heartedly.

Appleblossom dipped her head and sat back down, not arguing whatsoever.

Ambertail quickly glanced around at the other warriors; all of them had at least four pieces of fresh-kill, enough to stock the fresh-kill pile for a whole moon.

I only managed to stay in by a whisker-length, she realised with shock. *I need to up my game if I want any hope at even being considered for leader.*

AN: Hey anyone reading this! So, the first challenge has been

completed! Each chapter will have a new challenge that the cats will undertake, so I hope you're eager to see what else they have to go through!
Seriously though, thank you so much to anyone reading this story and enjoying it, it means a lot to me! Next chapter will be up soon!

warriorcats-mlp out!

Chapter Four

Ambertail groggily padded out of the warriors' den, her paws dragging across the ground. The weak dawn light filled the camp, and a chilly leaf-bare wind blew her whiskers askew. Her apprentice, Puddlepaw, limped out of his den after his littermates, Tigerpaw and Mistypaw. She beckoned her apprentice to her, and he quickly made his way over.

"Good morning, Ambertail," he mewed.

"Morning," she replied. "I'm slightly concerned about your injury."

She looked down at his injured hind leg, where his wound had dried-up blood covering it and a few stray cobwebs from when Streamswirl had patched it up.

"It's fine," Puddlepaw told her dismissively, giving his leg a quick shake.

"Are you sure?" she asked, watching him suspiciously. "It looks like it still hurts."

"I told you, I'm fine," Puddlepaw insisted.

Ambertail sighed with defeat, knowing that her apprentice wanted to show that he was strong.

She took her place with the group of cats in the clearing, waiting to be assigned to a patrol, which were being organised by Driftwater.

"Um, okay...how about Pinewhisker, you lead a hunting patrol with Seedfall, Ambertail and Puddlepaw," the tabby medicine cat meowed.

Ambertail exchanged a glance with Pinewhisker, who had sat down beside her.

"The fresh-kill pile is overflowing from yesterday," Pinewhisker

called to Driftwater.

"Oh, in that case, you can patrol the ShadowClan border," he meowed awkwardly. "And Fishpatch, Seedfall, Waterheart and Mistypaw can patrol the WindClan border."

"But you just put me on the ShadowClan border patrol!" Seedfall called out.

Driftwater looked incredibly uncomfortable as all the warriors watched him making mistakes.

"Yes, sorry, you go on the first patrol," he blurted out quickly. "Specklepelt, you can go on the WindClan border patrol instead."

Ambertail softly chuckled as Driftwater looked down at his paws, and she followed Pinewhisker as he gathered his patrol.

"Okay, lets go," he told them and headed out of camp at a fast pace.

Ambertail walked just behind him with Puddlepaw beside her and Seedfall bringing up the rear.

As they padded through the marshes of RiverClan towards the border with ShadowClan, Ambertail bounded forward so she was beside Pinewhisker.

"I think you'd make a good leader," she told the brown tom. A smile spread across his face and he flicked his tail.

"Nonsense," he scoffed. "I think you would make a much better leader, but I would be honoured to serve as your deputy," he added with a smirk.

Ambertail gently cuffed his ear with her paw and the patrol continued on its way to the ShadowClan border. The trees became denser and a few pine needles covered the ground, and the scent of ShadowClan washed over Ambertail. There must've been a patrol nearby.

"We should renew the scent markers," Seedfall suggested. Pinewhisker nodded and stepped up to renew them, but Puddlepaw

bounded forward before he could.

"Can I please do it?" he begged. "I know how to!"

"Alright," Pinewhisker said, allowing the apprentice to take his place. Puddlepaw beamed and renewed the scent marker.

"There, now those ShadowClan cats will never-"

"Never what?" a voice interrupted.

Puddlepaw yelped in surprise and jumped behind Ambertail in fright. Ambertail looked through the trees and saw a ShadowClan patrol emerging. She recognised Bearpounce, Curledfur and Hailfall instantly, but there was a small grey-and-black tabby she-cat in the patrol that she had never seen before.

"Get away from our border!" the grey-and-black tabby growled.

Bearpounce flicked his stubby tail in her face. "Wasppaw, calm down," he told the feisty apprentice. "They're allowed to be here, they're just patrolling like we are."

"Is she a bit excited to be on patrol?" Seedfall asked humorously.

Bearpounce chuckled. "Just a bit. She's a new apprentice."

"How is RiverClan going, you know, without a leader or deputy?" Curledfur asked cautiously, stepping closer to the border.

"We're fine," Pinewhisker replied curtly, trying not to give anything away with his voice. "Streamswirl is a fine temporary leader, and Driftwater is helping to organise patrols."

"Wouldn't it make more sense if a senior warrior acted as deputy for the time being?" Hailfall asked, his whiskers quivering nervously as if he knew the RiverClan warriors would be defensive.

Puddlepaw bounded forward, his hackles bristling. "Don't question Streamswirl's decisions!" he growled at the ShadowClan cats.

To Ambertail's surprise, none of the ShadowClan cats argued.

Hailfall dipped his head respectfully, and his Clanmates copied.

"ShadowClan wishes you good hunting and health," Bearpounce murmured. "May StarClan light your path."

"Thank you," Ambertail meowed.

Pinewhisker flicked his tail in signal for his patrol to leave, and Ambertail quickly followed him, eager to get away from the border. She felt a drop of rain hit the top of her head, and she looked up at the sky, seeing dark clouds covering it.

"We should get back to camp quickly, it's starting to rain," Ambertail suggested.

Pinewhisker nodded and sped up, leading his patrol through the territory at a run. Rain started to batter Ambertail's face, and by the time they got back to camp, she was soaking wet. The rest of her Clanmates were huddled in their dens, sheltering themselves from the rain. A cold wind whipped Ambertail's face. She just wanted to curl up in her nest until sunhigh.

"Um, Ambertail?" Puddlepaw mewed.

She turned around and saw blood dripping down his injured hind leg.

"My wound re-opened," he admitted quietly.

"Go to the medicine den and stay there," she instructed him. "I want you to stay warm."

Puddlepaw nodded and limped to the medicine cats' den as quickly as he could, and Ambertail raced to her den.

As she plopped down in her moss nest, she noticed Pinewhisker starting to move his nest. He had it gripped in his teeth, and he seemed to be moving towards her.

"What are you doing?" she asked as he dropped his nest in the space beside her.

"I thought I'd keep you company," he replied. "Plus, I wanted to be closer to you."

Ambertail could feel her face heating up, and her tail swished with embarrassment.

"Oh-okay," she stuttered.

As Pinewhisker curled up in his nest, Ambertail could feel the warmth from his body on her fur. She was glad to have his company, he seemed like the only cat she could confide in during this troubled time.

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"What's todays challenge?" Frogskip called to Streamswirl, who had just taken her place on the Great Stump. Rain was still pouring down in the camp, and all of the warriors competing were drenched. Ambertail shivered. She was soaked to the bone.

"Today will be a tracking-based competition," Streamswirl informed the Clan. "But I will be the one tracking you, you have to hide. The first cat to be found will be eliminated. Last cat to be found will get a head start in the next challenge."

Ambertail could feel the nerves making her spine tingle. She gave her paws a quick shake to rid them of the mud in her claws. *That gives me an idea,* she thought. She knew a way to at least not *lose* this challenge.

"Like yesterday, you will have a warning call from all the cats in the camp, and that will mean that I will start searching, and so will Driftwater," Streamswirl continued, shaking her sodden pelt.

"Wait," Toadleap called, looking up from a fish he was eating, "you're both going to be searching? Thats not fair!"

"It's perfectly fair," Streamswirl growled. "Now, begin!"

Ambertail slipped on the wet ground as she scrambled to her feet. She tucked her tail in towards her as the other cats raced past her frantically, and she followed. She knew where she wanted to go,

but would she have time to get there?

She pushed her legs to go as fast as they could carry her towards the stream, and she flew across the stepping stones in a few graceful leaps. She headed in the direction of the Island, but didn't leave her territory. She stopped abruptly when she came to a giant puddle of mud in front of a clump of holly bushes.

This is it! She thought excitedly, and dived into the mud. She rolled around in it until it covered her whole body, including her face. Her normal orange fur was now a sloppy, brown mess.

"As long as it disguises my scent, this should work," she said to herself, looking around to make sure no one else had gone the same way as her.

She could see Waterheart in the distance scrambling up a tree and hiding amongst the wet leaves. Trying not to think about her Clanmates, she pushed her way under the holly bush and hunkered down so that she was flat against the ground. She could feel the mud squelching around her belly, and she fought the urge to lick all of it off.

As she tried to shuffle deeper into the damp earth, she heard a caterwauling coming from the camp. It wasn't a lot of time to hide, and she felt sorry for anyone who hadn't managed to hide in that time. She saw Waterheart nearly fall out of his tree in alarm, but he managed to cling on.

Ambertail had to wait under her bush for quite a while before she saw Streamswirl's white-and-ginger pelt in the distance. The medicine cat's nose was in the air, and Ambertail could guess that she was scenting out her Clanmates. She heard Streamswirl call up the tree and a moment later, Waterheart clambered down. The two cats conversed for a moment; Ambertail desperately hoped that he wasn't telling the medicine cat where she was hiding.

After what seemed like a lifetime, Waterheart raced away in the direction of the camp, and Streamswirl started padding in Ambertail's direction. She held her breath and closed her gleaming green eyes so that the medicine cat wouldn't see them, and prayed

that she wouldnt be found. She could hear the medicine cat sniffing around, and she even stepped right up to the holly bush that Ambertail was hiding under. But to her relief, the medicine cat padded away without a word. Ambertail remembered that she was holding her breath, and she let it out in a big sigh.

At least I know I havent lost, she thought to herself optimistically.

She waited there for a long time. She kept thinking about leaving the bush to go back to camp, but then she remembered that the winner would get a head start in the next challenge, whatever it was.

She didn't have to wait much longer, though, because she saw Driftwater making his way towards her bush. She held her breath again as the medicine cat sniffed at the mud, then the holly bush. He took a step back, and was about to leave, when he turned back around and pushed his head under the bush. His eyes met Ambertail's.

"Is that...Ambertail?" he asked. "I can't tell with all that mud on you."

"Yep, it's me." Ambertail crawled out, a prickly branch catching her fur. It was still raining lightly and drizzle trickled into her eyes. She could feel the mud clumping her fur start to loosen and wash off. She flicked her ears and followed Driftwater through their territory towards the camp.

"Have you found everyone?" Ambertail asked, hoping that she didn't sound too eager.

"I'm not sure," Driftwater meowed without looking at her. "I don't know who Streamswirl has found, but I'm fairly certain that you're one of the last."

Ambertail prayed that she *was* the last, because she needed that head start. She knew she wasn't going to do well in these challenges, but she still had hope.

As she padded along beside the young medicine cat, she kept her

ears perked and her mouth open to take in all the sounds and scents around her, hoping that she would find someone who hadn't been found. They were just about to cross the stepping stones, when Ambertail heard a sneeze come from somewhere around a tree on the other side of the river. She leapt across the stepping stones and raced up to the tree. She could hear Driftwater following her closely, but she was too occupied with assessing the tree, trying to figure out where someone would hide in it.

"All the leaves have fallen off," she commented.

"Yeah, so?" Driftwater questioned, his tail flicking impatiently.

"Well, that means we'd see whoever was hiding there, so they must be on the ground," Ambertail explained.

"Who?" Driftwater cocked his head to the side, his yellow eyes filled with confusion.

"Didn't you hear that sneeze?" she asked the medicine cat, who shook his head in reply. Ambertail thought maybe she had imagined it, when a new scent bathed her tongue.

Lizardwing, she concluded after taking in the scent. And it was coming from the tree. She noticed that there was a pile of leaves at the foot of the trunk, and when she sniffed them, his scent was all over them. She started pushing them away to reveal the light brown tabby sitting in the hollowed out tree.

"Surprise," he meowed, a smirk on his face.

Ambertail rolled her eyes and made her way back to camp with the two toms walking behind her. When she pushed her way into camp, she looked around and realised that everyone was there, and that she and Lizardwing were the last to be found.

"Good job everyone," Streamswirl called. Everyone quickly sat down to find out who was going to be eliminated. "So, I found Toadleap first because he reeked of fish."

Ambertail looked at the grey tom; his head was hanging with embarrassment.

"Who did you find first, Driftwater?" Streamswirl asked.

The tabby medicine cat came up to the front and sat beside the Great Stump. "I found Orangelake first," he announced.

"Who reached camp first?" Streamswirl asked.

Toadleap took a step forward. "I did. And I wasn't slow, I came as quickly as I could," he told her truthfully.

"Alright, I'm sorry to say but you are eliminated," Streamswirl told him.

Toadleap dipped his head and sat down. Ambertail felt a pang of sympathy for him, knowing that he could've been a good leader.

"I see that Lizardwing and Ambertail were the last to arrive back," Streamswirl commented. "Who did you find last, Driftwater?"

"Lizardwing, but technically I didn't-"

"So that means *I* get a head start in the next challenge, right?" Lizardwing cut Driftwater off before he could finish talking.

"Yes, congratulations," Streamswirl meowed unenthusiastically.

Ambertail could see the pride gleaming in Lizardwing's eyes, and she knew that he would be gloating about this for the rest of the day, which she couldn't bear. She padded away from her Clanmates as they started dispersing, and picked a fish from the fresh-kill pile.

She sat down outside the warriors den and started gnawing on her fish, and was surprised to see Pinewhisker sit down beside her with a fish as well.

"Today was, um, interesting," he stated wearily.

"Yeah," Ambertail agreed. "If Lizardwing becomes leader, I don't think I'd be able to live in RiverClan anymore!" she added jokingly.

Pinewhisker laughed and bit into his fish.

"I wasn't joking when I said that you'd make a good leader," Ambertail admitted. "I really do think you could lead this Clan well."

"I wasn't kidding when I said you would too," Pinewhisker replied seriously. His amber eyes locked with Ambertail's green ones, and she suddenly felt her whiskers twitch and her face go hot under her fur. There was just something about Pinewhisker that made her feel happy when she was with him, and she started to feel her heart melt.

Am I falling for Pinewhisker?

Chapter Five

[image]

Ambertail sat at the base of a huge oak tree. Wind howled around her and made her shiver violently. Pinewhisker sat beside her, pushing his flank against her's to keep her warm.

She watched as Streamswirl paced at the front of the group of cats waiting for her to announce that day's challenge.

"Okay, today is a tree climbing contest," she finally announced.

Ambertail looked around nervously; she was not a good tree climber. She noticed Frogskip stand up, the ends of his grey-and-white fur bristling.

"What does hunting, hiding and tree climbing have to do with being a good leader?" he growled angrily. "All of these challenges have been useless!"

Ambertail couldn't help but agree with him. A leader didn't need to be good at tree climbing to be a good *leader*.

"Well StarClan didn't help me, so I have to choose a leader in my way," Streamswirl replied, her tail lashing.

Frogskip must have noticed her annoyance, because he sat down a moment later, his eyes still narrowed at the medicine cat.

"Whoever climbs the highest will be the winner, and whoever climbs the lowest will be eliminated," Streamswirl continued, looking out at her Clanmates. She nodded to Lizardwing, and the light brown tabby stepped forward so he was at the base of the tree.

Ambertail held her growl in as he shot a condescending smirk at her. She forced her fur to lie flat and flicked her tail.

Streamswirl waited until Lizardwing was ready, then yowled 'go' for him to start climbing. The tabby shot up the tree without looking

down, and Ambertail quickly took a place at the base of the tree as she waited to start.

Pinewhisker flicked her shoulder with his tail, and she gave him a grateful smile.

"Good luck," he whispered.

"You too," Ambertail mewed. She looked back at the tree and unsheathed her claws, ready to climb.

"Go!" Streamswirl cried for a second time, and Ambertail launched herself onto the trunk of the tree.

She dug her claws in as hard as she could and pulled herself up. Pinewhisker soon passed her. She could hear panting beside her and turned her head to see Swallowflight struggling to hold onto the tree.

"Are you okay?" Ambertail asked the tabby she-cat.

"No!" Swallowflight cried. "I have a fear of heights!"

"Just go back down, it's okay," Ambertail meowed soothingly.

"But then I'll be eliminated," Swallowflight said dejectedly.

"But do you really *want* to be leader?"

Swallowflight stared at Ambertail for a second, before hanging her head.

"Not really," she admitted. "I just wanted to try the challenges."

"It's okay, just climb back down," Ambertail mewed kindly.

Swallowflight nodded and slowly clambered down. Ambertail watched to make sure she was safely on the ground, before turning back to look up the tree. Everyone had passed her. She was at the bottom.

I need to speed up, she told herself angrily. She hauled herself up the

trunk as fast as she could until she reached the first sturdy branch. She sat on it for a moment, catching her breath and watching the cats on the ground who weren't competing. She noticed Specklepelt's tail twitching and whiskers quivering impatiently. He looked as though he wanted to join in.

Ambertail pushed the thought away and started to claw her way up the tree again. She could see Orangelake perched on a branch, panting hard, and she knew she could pass the ginger she-cat. She pushed herself up the tree further, her breath catching in her throat, until she managed to pass Orangelake.

Ambertail desperately looked around for another branch to cling onto, but the next branch was at least five tail-lengths above her. Her paws were tired and her breathing was fast and ragged. With a yowl of terror, her hind paws slipped from the tree, and she dug her front claws in for dear life. Her Clanmates all cast worried glances at her, and out of the corner of her eye she could see Orangelake quickly climbing towards her.

Ambertail drew in a sharp breath and managed to get her hind paws back onto the tree and dig her claws in.

"I'm okay!" she called to no one in particular. She knew she just needed to get to a branch so she could take a break.

As she started to climb up further, she heard loud voices coming from the ground. She took a deep breath and looked down. She felt dizzy for a moment, but her eyes quickly adjusted and she could see Streamswirl yelling at Specklepelt while Toadleap held the grey tom back by holding his forepaw on the younger cat's tail. Ambertail continued to watch, and she managed to pick up one sentence from Specklepelt.

"I just want a chance to compete!" he yelled.

Ambertail's whiskers twitched nervously as Specklepelt turned around and bit Toadleap's paw. The grey-and-white tom yowled in pain and let go of Specklepelt. The young warrior proceeded to race towards the tree and leapt onto the trunk.

"Specklepelt!" Streamswirl growled. "Get back down here!"

Ambertail was prepared to go down and grab Specklepelt, but he was clambering up the tree too fast. Before long, he was only a few tail-lengths below Ambertail.

"Go back down!" she yowled at him. He shot her a dirty look and pulled himself past her. He didn't understand how dangerous this challenge was.

Ambertail tried her hardest to keep up with the young warrior so she could keep him safe, but he was simply too fast for her to keep up with.

"Specklepelt! *Please!*" Ambertail cried. He was hidden in the leaves far above her, she couldn't even see him anymore. Lizardwing, who was still the highest up in the tree, was also trying to get the young tom to go back down.

Suddenly, a screech of terror split the air, and a moment later Specklepelt fell from the top of the tree. Ambertail cried out in shock, but sighed with relief when the grey warrior managed to grab a branch and cling on. He was a couple of tail-lengths above Ambertail. She knew she needed to help him.

"Specklepelt, hold on, I'm coming!" she called to him. She could see him nod his head slightly, and she used all of her strength to pull herself up as fast as possible.

The branch Specklepelt was clinging to was swaying precariously with his weight, and Ambertail desperately hoped it wouldn't break. She managed to make it to the branch, and she sat on the strongest part of it at it's base.

"Specklepelt, it's okay," she mewed calmly. "I'll help you."

She reached out her neck as far as she could, but she couldn't reach the tom. She stepped forward slightly, but jumped back again when a creak came from the branch, and a small crack formed.

I'm too heavy, it won't support both of our weight!

"Ambertail! Quickly!" Specklepelt cried. Fear gleamed in his blue eyes, and his hind legs were waving frantically in the air.

"I'm trying!" Ambertail reassured the young warrior. She took another small step forward, and the branch creaked again; the strong wind wasn't helping.

"It's breaking!" Specklepelt yowled in terror.

Ambertail's breathing hitched as she saw more cracks forming in the branch, and she knew it wouldn't hold for much longer. She took one more step forward, and she managed to reach Specklepelt's scruff. She tried to lift him up, but he was too heavy. She held onto his scruff, but a crack echoed through the air, and the branch split before her paws. Specklepelt fell through her grasp and plummeted down to the ground.

"No!" Ambertail cried. She watched as he fell through the air, and he hit the ground, making a sickening cracking sound.

"Specklepelt!" Cries from her Clanmates echoed in Ambertail's ears. She looked at Specklepelt's body on the ground in horror. Her stomach churned, making her feel sick. Her breathing quickened so much that she felt like she was starting to hyperventilate.

She quickly clambered down the trunk of the tree, carefully making sure she didn't fall. She could hear everyone else scrambling down after her.

When she reached the bottom, she sat beside the young tom's body. His neck was twisted at a strange angle, his eyes were glazed over and looking to the sky, and a trickle of blood pooled from his mouth. She buried her nose in his fur; his body was still warm.

You were my first apprentice, I will miss you so much.

"Oh dear StarClan," a voice breathed behind Ambertail.

She turned around to see the rest of her Clanmates all gathering around the grey tom, each of them mourning for him. Ambertail looked at Streamswirl, desperately trying to catch the medicine cat's gaze, but Streamswirl avoided eye contact.

"W-we should get back to camp," Driftwater stuttered awkwardly. Sorrow clouded his gaze, but Ambertail could tell he was trying not to let it show.

Ambertail stepped forward to help carry Specklepelt's body. She hoisted half of him on her back while Driftwater supported his top half.

Grief and anger gripped Ambertail. She was so enraged with Streamswirl for letting this happen, especially to such a young cat, but she still couldn't believe that Specklepelt, her first apprentice, was now dead.

I could've saved him, she growled to herself. *I* should've *saved him.*

She couldn't help but feel like this was partly her fault, and that she should have convinced him to go back down or held on to him better. *I'm sorry, Specklepelt.*

The Clan trudged back to the camp together in silence, all of them too shocked to speak. When they pushed through the reeds that surrounded the camp, the cats that had stayed behind all emerged from their dens to see what had happened. Wolfwhisper was the first to step forward, and a look of horror flashed across her face.

"What happened?" she mewed worriedly, sniffing at Specklepelt's fur.

Ambertail let his body slide off her back, and she opened her mouth to reply but was cut off when a voice rose up above hers.

"Specklepelt!" Seedfall cried and pushed past the throng of crowding cats. Ambertail's belly twisted in a gut-wrenching way as she remembered that Specklepelt and Seedfall were brother and sister.

"How could you let this happen?" Seedfall growled at Streamswirl. "He wasn't meant to compete!"

"We-we tried t-to stop him," Streamswirl stammered with a mix of grief and shock.

"Well you should've tried harder!" Seedfall yowled and buried her

nose in her brother's fur. Ambertail could understand the young cat's grief, having lost loved ones of her own. She took a step toward the young she-cat and placed her tail on her shoulder.

"Seedfall, we tried everything we could to stop him," she mewed quietly. "There was nothing we could do."

Seedfall looked into her eyes, her own eyes clouded with sorrow. "B-but..."

"Hush, you'll see him again one day, I promise," Ambertail whispered soothingly. To her surprise, Seedfall nodded and pushed her nose into Ambertail's fur for comfort.

The Clan sat vigil for the young tom late into the night. Ambertail watched as a few cats rose to their paws and trudged into their den, yawning. She wanted to sit beside her old apprentice for longer, but her legs ached to move. She stood up and stretched each leg in turn.

"You going back to your nest?" Pinewhisker whispered in her ear.

Ambertail shook her head. "I need to take a walk."

Pinewhisker looked deep into her green eyes. "I'll come with you."

Ambertail gave him a small nod and turned to the camp exit. She pushed her way through the reeds, letting the moonshine wash over her. The air was crisp and cold, so she fluffed up her fur in an attempt to keep herself warm. She took a deep breath of the fresh air and leapt onto the first stepping stone of the stream. She could hear Pinewhiskers steady paw steps behind her, and was slightly comforted by the sound.

The black stream gurgled underneath her, but she nimbly crossed the stepping stones with ease. A light drizzle washed over her face; she shook her head and sat down in the shelter of a tree.

Pinewhisker settled down beside her, the moonlight turning his light brown fur a soft grey. Ambertail glanced at him and looked into his bright amber eyes; they were comforting in these strenuous times. She placed her head and his shoulder and watched as the moon peeked out from behind a black cloud.

"I n-need to tell you something," Pinewhisker stuttered to Ambertail. She could hear nervousness in his voice.

"Yes?" Ambertail asked curiously.

"I've been thinking about you a lot in the past moon," Pinewhisker started, his voice more confident. "As more than just a friend."

Ambertail's heart skipped a beat. She cared for him, more than she thought she could care for another cat, but she didn't know what to do or say.

"And I was wondering, would you want to be my mate?" Pinewhisker's amber eyes pierced through Ambertail's, and she could see love in his eyes.

Ambertail had never had a mate, she didn't know how to respond. But would taking a mate while focusing on the challenges every day be a smart idea?

I like him, I really do, but now is not the best time.

"Pinewhisker, I'm not sure if now is the best time to have a mate, for either of us," Ambertail mewed sombrely. She looked at the brown tom; his eyes were wide and his mouth was slightly open, but no sound came out.

"I'm sorry," Ambertail whispered. When she looked back at Pinewhisker, there was a hint of a smile on his face.

"She-cats are confusing," he blurted out.

Ambertail laughed, not sure how to respond. "How so?"

"I thought you liked me, were you just leading me on?" Pinewhisker asked, more seriously this time.

Ambertail realised that what she said must have been more hurtful than she thought. "No, I promise I wasn't," she reassured the tom. "I *do* like you, I just think that with everything going on right now, it isn't the best time to take a mate."

Pinewhisker looked up to the dark sky, a thoughtful gaze crossing his face. He looked back at Ambertail and she was sure she could see all the stars in the sky reflected in his deep eyes.

"I'll wait for you," he mewed softly.

A warmth spread through Ambertail's body from ear to tail. She could feel her heart beating rapidly. Had she made the right choice?

Chapter Six

Ambertail dragged her paws as she led her hunting patrol towards the river. She was still tired from staying up so late the previous night. Everyone else seemed tired as well, but not just from Specklepelt's vigil; the challenges everyday were making everyone drowsy, except for the apprentices, who were bouncing around with excitement most of the time. But after Specklepelt's death, even *they* were moping around.

Cinderstream walked beside Ambertail, their fur brushing.

"Swallowflight told me about how you comforted her yesterday," the grey tabby meowed. "I think you would make a good leader."

Ambertail looked at the young she-cat with shock in her eyes. She had no idea other cats thought she could even *become* leader.

"What? Why?" Ambertail blurted out.

"You're always ready to help anyone, you always put others first, you're calm and collected, I could go on," Cinderstream told her, her eyes full of amusement.

"Yeah, I agree!" Tigerpaw chimed in, skipping alongside Fishpatch, his mentor.

Ambertail felt her fur go hot as Fishpatch's gaze raked over her; there was something intimidating about the look in his eyes. Maybe he thought he would make a better leader than her, since he was still in the competition. But he said nothing, to Ambertail's relief.

"Uh, thanks Tigerpaw," Ambertail meowed awkwardly, her whiskers quivering slightly.

The patrol stayed quiet the rest of the way to the river and all sat down a few tail-lengths away from each other, except for Tigerpaw and Fishpatch, who sat beside each other.

Ambertail put all of her focus into watching for fish. She pushed away all of the pressures of the challenges, and the death of Specklepelt, and how her Clanmates were starting to turn on each other. All that mattered in this moment was catching fish to feed her Clan.

A flash of silver shone through the water, and Ambertail darted her paw in and hooked the fish on her claws. It landed beside her with a thump. It flopped around for a moment, until she killed it with a swift bite.

Further upstream, she heard Tigerpaw hiss in annoyance. "I had it! It slipped away!"

Fishpatch's calm voice cut through him. "It's okay, just try again. Maybe let's move."

Who am I kidding? Ambertail thought to herself. *There are so many other warriors that would make great leaders. Fishpatch, Waterheart or even Sprucejump would all make better leaders than me!*

After fishing for a while, Ambertail only had two fish on her small pile, reminding her of the first challenge. She looked up to the sky and through the clouds, she could see that it was nearly sunhigh.

Oh no! The next challenge is starting soon!

"Alright everyone!" Ambertail called to her patrol. "We need to get back to camp now!"

She saw Fishpatch look up to the sky and have the same revelation she just had. She grabbed her two fish in her mouth and raced back to camp, the sound of her patrol's steps pounding behind her let her know that they were following her.

As she burst into camp, she saw that all of the competing warriors were already sitting down to listen to the rules. She quickly placed her fish on the fresh-kill pile and sat at the back beside Waterheart. Streamswirl gave her a quick smile, then looked out across the warriors.

"Today's challenge is a hunt, but a different sort of hunt," the

medicine cat explained. "You will all be hunting for the same thing: a rock marked with blood. The cat to bring the rock back to camp will get a head-start in the next challenge."

Ambertail's breath caught in her throat; maybe she had a chance to win this challenge. She was good at tracking, and this could help her with whatever the next challenge was.

"The last cat to make it back to camp will be eliminated," Streamswirl added. "Go!"

This time, Ambertail was ready. She was already on the tips of her paws, and as soon as Streamswirl gave the signal, she raced out of camp. But then a thought struck her as the rest of the warriors rushed past her; she needed to know what scent to track.

After all of the warriors were out of camp, she turned back and pushed her way back into camp. Streamswirl gave her a suspicious look, but Ambertail ignored it and padded over to the fresh-kill pile. She pushed all of the fish on the top away until the tang of blood bathed her tongue. She saw one fish that had a strange gash on it, and a small, bloody paw-print.

That's it! Streamswirl used the blood of this fish!

Ambertail drew in a large breath to take in the scent of it, and once she was familiar with it, she raced out of camp again. She could feel Streamswirl's gaze burning into her pelt as she left.

Ambertail stuck her nose into the air, trying to draw in the scent of fish. A faint tang hit her tongue, and she could tell that it was the scent of fish.

Everyone else are too busy running to find the rock to think to smell for it, Ambertail thought to herself.

Following the scent of fish, Ambertail made her way slowly through the territory. Twigs and bushes covered the path, so she was careful not to make a sound as to alert the other warriors. She couldn't smell or hear anyone else, so she hoped that no one was near her. She could tell that she was close to the rock; the scent of the fish

was much stronger.

She continued to follow the scent trail until she came to the base of a tree, where the scent abruptly stopped.

What? Ambertail looked around in confusion. Surely the rock was around here somewhere. As she looked around, she tilted her head up to try and pick up the scent, and it started to wash over her. She looked up into the tree and could see a small bird's nest in the high branches.

I bet the rock is in there.

Ambertail looked the tree up and down; it was smooth to the touch.

How in StarClan's name did Driftwater get up there?

Ambertail walked around the tree, desperately trying to find somewhere to put her paws to push herself up. Finally, she spotted a small divot in the trunk where she could place her paws and got ready to climb. As she was about to haul herself up, she heard rustling behind her, and a cat's scent started to waft over her.

Oh no, that's...

"Thank you, Ambertail," Lizardwing purred as he stepped towards her. "You've led me right to the rock, how kind of you."

"I don't know what you're talking about, I only stopped here to rest," Ambertail lied, wanting the swipe the smug look off her Clanmate's face.

"Oh, please, I followed you here. I saw you go back into camp and wondered what you were doing. So I waited until you came back out of camp, then I followed you." Lizardwing flicked his tail as he started circling Ambertail. "So I'm going to get that rock, and you're not going to do anything about it."

Ambertail watched for a moment as Lizardwing stepped toward her, his teeth starting to bare in a snarl. "Lizardwing, we're Clanmates, why are you acting like I'm a threat?"

"Because you *are* a threat. To me!" Lizardwing growled, his neck fur standing on end. "If I want to be leader, I can't have another warrior beat me to it!"

"Listen, this isn't the way to go about winning," Ambertail calmly explained, trying not to let her fear of her own Clanmate show. "A leader wouldn't fight their own warriors like this, they would be reasonable and-"

"Oh, shut up!" Lizardwing raised his paw and, with one swift swipe, brought his claws down on Ambertail's face.

Pain shot through her cheek and she fell to the ground. She stared at Lizardwing in pain. How could he do that to his own Clanmate? She could see guilt flash in his eyes, but the brown tabby made no move to help her or apologise. The two cats glared at each other for a moment before Ambertail rose to her paws.

With a look of defiance, she growled, "And a leader certainly would *never* attack a Clanmate." In one quick motion, Ambertail swiped the mud at her paws into Lizardwing's face and started to scramble up the tree while he was distracted. She could hear the warrior snarling as she made her way up the tree, and after a few moments, she looked down to see him following her up.

"Don't you see, Ambertail?" he cried after her. "I could make RiverClan stronger than it's ever been!"

"You would just turn us all into vicious fighters!" Ambertail growled at him, not looking down. She pushed herself onto the first branch of the smooth tree, happy to have something to grip onto. She took a quick glance at Lizardwing and realised he was already more than halfway up to the branch. She bunched her legs and pushed off the branch with all of her might, propelling herself up to the next one above her. She gripped on with her claws and pulled herself up.

"The other Clans just see us as lazy fish-eaters!" Lizardwing continued to get closer to Ambertail as he pulled himself onto the branch she had just jumped from. "But I can make us so much more! I can make the other Clans *fear* us! I can-"

His words cut off as a crack sounded through the air. Ambertail looked to see that the branch he was perched on was breaking off the tree; Ambertail realised she must have weakened it from pushing off of it so hard. Lizardwing looked at her, now with fear glowing in his eyes.

"I-I'm sorry," he stammered, "Please help me up, I'm begging you." He started to carefully reach out his paw to Ambertail sitting on the branch above him. After a moment of hesitation, Ambertail reached her paw out towards him. She was about to try to pull him up, when he unsheathed his claws and swung them at her paw. She drew away just in time, but she heard his branch crack again.

"You didn't want me to help you, you wanted to push me out of the tree!" she growled at the tabby. "There's no way I'm helping you now!"

"No, please wait!" Lizardwing cried, real fear now flooding his voice. "I think the branch is actually going to break!"

Ambertail glared at him, then turned away and started pulling herself to the next branch where the old bird's nest was sitting.

"Wait!" Lizardwing yowled, trying to jump up to the branch. He missed, and fell back down onto the weak branch. It snapped beneath him, and Ambertail whipped around, watching him fall out of the tree to the ground. He landed with a thump in the puddle of mud.

"No!" Ambertail cried. *I didn't mean for that to happen!* Images of Specklepelt's twisted body suddenly crashed through her mind; she tightly squeezed her eyes shut, trying to force the memory and heartache out of her head.

She frantically debated whether or not to go down and check to see if he was okay, but he started shifting around and then got up onto all fours. "Thank StarClan," she breathed with relief. She could see that Lizardwing was limping, but otherwise seemed to be fine.

With the knowledge that Lizardwing was still alive, Ambertail quickly jumped up to the branch with the nest, and with tingle of

joy, saw a small, smooth rock with a bloody paw print on it. She reached in carefully and grabbed to rock with her jaws, getting a good grip on it so she wouldnt drop it. She slowly made her way down the tree, jumping down the last few tail-lengths. Lizardwing waited for her at the bottom, his eyes glazed slightly with pain, but mostly hatred burned in his gaze.

Ambertail nodded towards her shoulder for Lizardwing to lean on; he begrudgingly took her offer and leaned his weight on her shoulder as they walked slowly back to camp. Ambertail couldnt help but feel guilty about Lizardwing's injured leg, but he fell trying to push her out of the tree, which made her feel slightly less guilty.

As they walked back into camp, Lizardwing flopped down to rest, giving his right shoulder a tender lick. Wolfwhisper, who was sitting in the pale sunlight dappled around the camp, quickly jumped to her feet and raced over to Lizardwing.

"What happened?" the grey she-cat questioned frantically. "Why is he limping?"

Streamswirl slowly padded over to the warriors with Driftwater following closely behind her. The tabby medicine leaned over Lizardwing and gave his shoulder a sniff, then placed his paw on the shoulder.

"His shoulder is inflamed," Driftwater concluded, "but it doesn't feel broken or dislocated."

"What happened?" Streamswirl asked, turning to Ambertail.

Ambertail hesitated, not sure whether she should snitch on her Clanmate. "He fell out of a tree, the one the rock was in." She gestured to the blood-stained rock with her tail.

"She *pushed* me out of the tree!" Lizardwing declared with a yowl.

Wolfwhisper jumped back with a gasp, then thrust her muzzle in Ambertail's face. "Why would you do that? You could have *killed* him! Then my kits would be left without a father!" she cried.

"What? No!" Ambertail shouted desperately. "I would *never* do that

to a Clanmate!"

"Then why did he say you pushed him out of the tree?" Driftwater asked suspiciously, padding up to Ambertail.

"He's lying!" Ambertail defended herself.

By this time, other cats were starting to gather around the arguing cats. Some looked shocked at what was being said, others were puzzled as to what was happening.

"Is that true?" Seedfall asked Lizardwing hesitantly. "Did Ambertail shove you out of a tree so she could win?"

"Yes, she-"

"No I didn't!" Ambertail yelled over all of the murmuring, shutting everyone up. "This is all a big misunderstanding."

Should I tell them the truth? That he's *the one that tried to push* me*?*

"Listen, please," Ambertail began, getting every cat's attention. "I tracked the scent of the stone to the tree, and Lizardwing saw me. We fought over it for a moment," Ambertail showed everyone the bleeding scratches on her cheek to show it wasn't all her fault, "and Lizardwing fell out of the tree trying to beat me to it." Ambertail watched her Clanmates' faces carefully for their reactions. Eelfang and Cinderstream stared at Ambertail and Lizardwing incredulously, Appleblossom, Pebbletooth and Toadleap all exchanged nervous glances, and everyone else looked at Lizardwing in shock.

"I didn't push my own Clanmate out of a tree, I *swear*," Ambertail finished.

Streamswirl finally stepped forward. "I'll take your word for it, Ambertail, I trust you. Lizardwing is in pain and is delirious, he probably doesn't even realise what happened. Driftwater," the medicine cat turned to her tabby apprentice, "take Lizardwing to the medicine den, I'll check on him later."

Driftwater quickly nodded and helped the light brown tabby to his

feet and carefully guided him to the medicine den.

"Well then," Streamswirl continued, looking at her Clanmates. "That gives us a winner, so everyone else needs to make their way back to the camp." With that, the white and ginger she-cat let out a loud caterwaul, to which all of her Clanmates joined in.

Ambertail sat silently, not wanting to make any noise. How could Lizardwing betray her like that? Try to kill her and then say that she tried to kill *him* to cover up for himself. *The nerve of some cats,* Ambertail growled inwardly to herself.

"Cats of RiverClan!" Streamswirl called to her Clan from the tree stump. "Today's winner is Ambertail, who used her intuition to figure out how to track the stone."

Almost everyone cheered for Ambertail, but she still managed to hear one small comment from the back of the group; "I still think she pushed Lizardwing out of the tree." Ambertail was sure it was Wolfwhisper.

"And I'm sorry to say, but as Orangelake was the last to return to camp, she is eliminated this round," Streamswirl added, giving the speckled ginger she-cat a sympathetic glance.

Orangelake dipped her head respectfully, though she looked slightly disappointed.

"That concludes today's challenge!" Streamswirl jumped down from the stump and quickly trotted over to her den, where she was no doubt going to check on Lizardwing.

Ambertail could feel her heart pounding in her chest from everything that had just happened; from Lizardwing nearly meeting the same fate as Specklepelt, then blaming Ambertail for it, and then her winning the challenge in spite of that. She breathed a sigh of as the Clan started to disperse, giving her more room to breathe. Worried thoughts still washed through her head every second about the challenges, and how they were starting to become fatal.

Ambertail was snapped out of her anxious daze when she felt a tail

softly place on her back; she swivelled her head to see Orangelake giving her a sweet smile.

"Good job today," she mewed, you deserved that win."

Ambertail gave the older warrior a grateful nod, not finding any words to come out of her mouth.

"Now, what's this I hear about you and Lizardwing getting into a bit of a scuffle?" Orangelake inquired with a slightly amused purr.

Ambertail shook her head, her mind still reeling. "He accused me...I mean, he- well, um," Ambertail struggled to get any words out of her mouth, unsure of what she was actually trying to say. "Lizardwing and I, well, we both found the rock we were hunting for today, it was up in a tree in a bird's nest," she started to explain finally, omitting the part of Lizardwing stalking her to cheat in the challenge. "We had a small fight over it, and he ended up falling out of the tree trying to beat me to it." Ambertail firmly decided she wasn't going to tell anyone what Lizardwing *actually* attempted to do to her, she just couldn't bring herself to ruin another Clanmate's life like that.

Orangelake's face was widened with confusion. "Cinderstream told me that he said you pushed him out of that tree." Ambertail could tell she was trying to ask if that was true without actually asking the awkward question.

"I think he just got a bit confused after the fall," Ambertail meowed, hoping that would sound plausible enough. "He must've hit his head when he hit the ground."

Ambertail studied Orangelake's face, trying to figure out if she believed her or not. Finally, Orangelake broke into a *mrrow* of laughter.

"Oh, I didn't believe his story for a second," Orangelake reassured her, her tail flicking on Ambertail's back. "Not if you're anything like your mother."

Ambertail's breathing stopped for a moment and her heart skipped a

beat; she looked down at her paws, not wanting Orangelake to see the grief that was flooding into her eyes.

"Ambertail," Orangelake mewed softly, placing her tail under the she-cat's chin, "look at me."

Ambertail complied, slowly lifting her gaze to meet Orangelake's. Holding that eye-contact was even more heartbreaking than anything that had happened that day.

"Sandyfoot would be so proud of you," Orangelake breathed, affection filling her gaze.

Ambertail's whiskers quivered as she tried to keep her composure, but the mention of her mother's name was too much for her. It had been many seasons since Ambertail last saw her mother, who had died from an infection that ravaged her body when Ambertail was merely an apprentice.

"You know," Orangelake continued with a light-hearted mew, "I bet she's looking down at you from Silverpelt right now."

Ambertail hesitated for a moment, then looked up to the sky; it was grey and cloudy, looking as miserable as Ambertail felt, not even the sun could be seen. "I don't see anything up there, certainly not my mother," Ambertail meowed solemnly, looking back down at her paws.

"Just because you can't see them, doesn't mean that they can't see you." Orangelake wrapped her tail around Ambertail's body as she spoke, still looking up at the sky. "She was the best litter-mate I could have asked for," Orangelake purred after a moment.

Ambertail finally looked at the ginger she-cat, whose green eyes were just as beautiful as she remembered her mother's were.

"I miss her too, Ambertail. We always had fun together as apprentices, and she would always look out for me, but I don't let the sorrow of her death distract me from those good memories." Orangelake had a slight smile as she spoke, and Ambertail knew she was right, but is was so hard not to mourn her mother, especially

now that Splashfall was gone too.

"You need to become leader, Ambertail. For her."

That caught Ambertail off guard. *Why does she think I have to be leader? Surely she agrees that one of the others would be a better choice.*

"Do it for Sandyfoot," Orangelake added, touching muzzles with the younger warrior. "Be the leader she knew you could be."

With that, Orangelake rose to her paws, giving her legs each a quick stretch. "Thank goodness I'm not in the challenges anymore, I need a rest!" The she-cat padded off towards the warriors' den, a big yawn escaping her mouth.

Ambertail felt grief gripping her belly, like she had swallowed a stone and it was pulling her to the ground. Orangelake's words were really starting to sink in, and Ambertail felt a rush of assurance pass through her.

I'm doing this for Sandyfoot and Splashfall now. I can lead this Clan into a time of great triumph and peace, and I know they'll be proud of me!

Chapter Seven

"So, how's your leg?" Ambertail asked Puddlepaw, who was sprawled out in his nest in the apprentices' den.

The wound on the grey tabby's hind leg was looking much better than it did a few sunrises ago after it had been re-opened, and the apprentice was starting to act more like his usual lively self.

"It feels good!" Puddlepaw chimed, jumping up to his paws as if to prove what he had just said. "Driftwater gave me some stretches to make sure it doesn't weaken or anything." Puddlepaw began demonstrating said stretches, lowering himself down and then stretching up again.

Ambertail let out an amused purr. "Don't go hurting it again, though, I need you nice and strong to continue with your training, especially today."

Puddlepaw opened his mouth to respond, but was interrupted by Mistypaw, his litter-mate, bumping her head against his flank.

"Puh-lease," she groaned, "Puddlepaw? *Strong*? Good luck getting that to happen, even without a gammy leg!"

"Hey!" Puddlepaw whined. "Stop being mean to me."

Ambertail had to hold herself back from laughing at her apprentice's meagre retort. He was genuinely one of the sweetest cats in the Clan.

"Mistypaw, be nice to your brother," Ambertail meowed, her voice edged with sarcasm.

"He knows I do it out of love." Mistypaw quickly leaned forward and licked her brother's cheek, to which he responded by shooting her an angered glare. Mistypaw bounded out of the den before Puddlepaw could say anything else, looking over her shoulder to

stick her tongue out playfully.

Puddlepaw sat down with a *humph*, his ears flattening against his head.

"Come on," Ambertail beckoned with her ears for the grumpy apprentice to follow her out of the den. "We have a fair bit of training to get in before sunhigh."

Puddlepaw straightened up, nodding eagerly, and followed his mentor out of the apprentices' den and into the clearing.

Ambertail breathed in the crisp, fresh air, letting it fill her lungs and cool her down. She had struggled to fall asleep the previous night after her conversation with Orangelake. So many memories of her mother flooded back to her each time she closed her eyes, so she had resolved to keeping them open, leading to her not getting much sleep.

It's fine, Ambertail, you're fine, she told herself inwardly, though she wasn't sure she believed it. *There won't be many more challenges, and whatever happens at the end, happens. I just need to do my best.* But right now, she needed to focus on training her apprentice, as she still had her warrior duties to complete on top of each daily challenge.

She could feel Puddlepaw's fur brush against her pelt as she padded across camp to Fishpatch, who was grooming himself in a tiny patch of sun. The grey tom looked up at Ambertail as she stood in front of him, blocking out his one tiny spot of sun.

"Ready for group training?" she asked him.

A look of realisation spread across Fishpatch's face; Ambertail could tell he had forgotten about the planned training for the apprentices that day.

"Oh...uh, y-yeah, of course," Fishpatch mewed hastily as he rose to his paws, giving his pelt a quick shake.

"Tigerpaw! Mistypaw!" Ambertail called out to the other apprentices, who were play fighting a little bit away from the

warriors' den. "Training time!"

The two litter-mates bundled forward as fast as possible so they were standing in front of the two warriors.

Fishpatch rolled his eyes. "Mistypaw, could you please get your mentor out of his nest?"

The grey tabby she-cat gave a sheepish grin and raced back to the warriors' den.

"Now, Puddlepaw," Ambertail turned her attention back to her own apprentice. "You still need to take it easy today. I will not have that wound open up and get infected. We have enough problems around here as it is."

She heard a snort come from Fishpatch. "I'll say," he grumbled.

Ambertail took a deep breath, trying to calm herself as troubling thoughts of her father, Splashfall, and Specklepelt started to worm their way into her mind.

I know it's hard to take in everything that's happened, but I just need to focus on helping my Clan now. I can do that, can't I?

Ambertail noticed that Mistypaw had just re-joined the group with Waterheart padding behind her.

"Right, let's head off then, we still have a fair bit of time before sunhigh," Fishpatch meowed, leading the group out of camp and towards the stream cutting through their territory.

The morning air was cold, and fog shrouded the undergrowth that was only five paw-steps in front of the cats; Ambertail could feel the water in the air clinging to her pelt and making is slightly damp. She heard Puddlepaw wince as he stumbled over a small pebble.

"You okay?" she asked her apprentice, concerned that his leg would start bleeding again.

Puddlepaw quickly inspected his leg. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," he assured her, "just wasn't expecting that. I can barely see a tail-length

in front of me!"

Ambertail chucked softly. "Well we need to make sure that you always have your wits about you in battle, even on miserable leaf-bare mornings."

"Speaking of which," Fishpatch cut in, stopping in front of the group. "We're here, this is where we'll be training today."

They were standing in front of the stream, the dark water gurgling as it rushed past them. Ambertail could feel the cool mist spraying off it.

The water must be pretty cold this morning. She knew she would be getting wet today, but that didn't mean that she was looking forward to it.

"Right," Ambertail meowed, turning to face the apprentices, who were starting to shake from the cold. "Today we're working on water attacks."

Mistypaw snorted. "What? We're going to learn to control the water or something?"

Tigerpaw chuckled beside her, while Puddlepaw looked down at his paws, seemingly trying to hold in his amusement as well.

"Of course not!" Waterheart mewed with laughter. "It's a surprise attack starting from the water. Other Clans don't like swimming, right? So we take advantage of that."

"I'm not particularly fond of swimming when it's freezing cold either," Tigerpaw grumbled.

Fishpatch shot his apprentice a warning glare, and Tigerpaw shuffled his paws with embarrassment.

"I know today doesn't seem like the best day to do this," Ambertail started gently, but you'll need to get used to swimming in all sorts of conditions as RiverClan cats."

"You wouldn't want to be called 'drypaws', would you?" Fishpatch

teased.

The three apprentices all shook their heads earnestly.

"Well then, let's get started!" Fishpatch meowed.

The three warriors stood at the edge of the stream, looking down into the rushing water.

"So, who's actually getting in to demonstrate?" Waterheart asked awkwardly after a moment.

Silence between the three cats drew on for a few heartbeats, before Ambertail rolled her eyes. "I guess I will, I've got a thick coat." She didn't exactly want the get into the freezing cold water, but she knew someone would have to.

"Thanks, Ambertail," Waterheart murmured. The black tom raced away from the water's edge and explained to the apprentices what they would be demonstrating.

As Ambertail dipped her forepaw into the stream to test it, the sudden image of a black and white cat flailing helplessly in the water filled her head. Her breathing quickened for a moment as she tried to hold her emotions back, and after she had regained her composure, she nose-dived into the stream.

Dear StarClan, that is freezing!

The cold water shocked her body, making her go rigid for a moment and stinging her pelt, before she shook herself and bobbed back up to the surface. She found a rock that she could reach and perched on it while she waited to make sure Waterheart had finished his explanation. The black warrior gave her a nod, and she plunged herself back under the water. Blackness swirled around her as she stayed there for a moment, until she swiftly pushed herself out of the stream and onto the bank, completely soaked, where she then raced at Waterheart and tackled him to the ground.

"And there you have it!" Fishpatch stepped towards the apprentices. "A surprise attack from the water! Gets the ThunderClan cats every time."

While the grey and white tom spoke, Ambertail gave herself a massive shake, trying to rid her pelt of as much water as she could. Her fur fluffed out in an attempt to keep herself warmer. *I really hope I don't have to do that again today.*

The three apprentices all exchanged apprehensive glances, before Mistypaw grumbled loudly and plodded over to the stream.

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Many sodden pelts later, Ambertail noticed the sun behind the clouds was slowly creeping to its highest point.

"I think we might be done with training today!" she called out to the other cats, who were going over fighting techniques.

Waterheart and Fishpatch both looked up to where Ambertail was angling her ears to the sky, nodded, and rounded up the apprentices to follow them back to camp. Ambertail walked at the rear of the group with Puddlepaw, feeling too awkward to walk with Fishpatch and Waterheart, given that they were both still competing against her.

"What do you think today's challenge will be?" Puddlepaw asked his mentor eagerly. Ambertail took note that his leg seemed much better now, even after the swimming and training.

"I'm not sure...I hadn't really thought about it," Ambertail answered truthfully. "But I do hope it's something that will warm me up!"

As Ambertail shook a few drops of water from her tail, the thoughts of the black and white cat returned to her head, this time of the cats body being dragged from the water.

Why did we have to go swimming today? she lamented, trying desperately to push the thoughts back. *I haven't thought about Birdpaw for many moons.*

Ambertail realised that her heart was thumping hard in her chest and her breathing had become ragged.

"Are you nervous about the challenge?" Puddlepaw asked her,

intruding her thoughts.

Ambertail couldn't bring herself to tell the apprentice the truth of what was causing her panic; she didn't even want to talk about it at all.

I wonder how well the rest of the Clan remembers Birdpaw, its been so long now.

"Y-yeah, I'm just, n-nervous," Ambertail stuttered out, not looking at her apprentice.

Puddlepaw looked at her curiously, as if maybe he didn't believe her, but he didn't push it. Ambertail was glad when her flicked his ears and turned to look back to where they were walking.

Please StarClan, don't let today's challenge be a hard one...or a deadly *one.*

Ambertail was really starting to get worried with how dangerous the challenges were becoming, with some cats now being injured, and Specklepelt, a cat too young to even be leader, died trying to prove his worth to the Clan.

It feels like death is just looming over us like a dark cloud.

Ambertail shook her head to clear it as the group of cats entered the camp, pushing through the reeds to step into the clearing. The sun was weakly shining in the sky, and most of the Clan were in the clearing, soaking up as much of the warmth as they could. Ambertail could feel that her pelt was still damp, so she quickly bounded over to a sunny patch near the elders' den after giving Puddlepaw's ear a flick with her tail, knowing that the next challenge wouldn't start for a little bit.

Palestride, the old grey tom that Ambertail remembered telling her stories when she was a kit, purred softly as she sat beside him, tucking her paws underneath her. "Finally a spot of sun."

A purr rose in Ambertail's throat. "I know, it's a nice break from the cold and wet we've had for the past moon." She could feel that her thick pelt was starting to warm up slightly, the water drying up.

"Of course," Palestride continued, "it won't make up for the miserable days we're having."

Ambertail knew the elder was referring to the daily challenges.

The orange she-cat looked away, not sure how the elder felt about her competing.

Palestride started meowing carefully, "Obviously I know this is a hard time for the Clan, and Streamswirl must be under a lot of pressure to pick the right cat." He stopped and sighed. "But surely there must've been a better way to choose."

A croak came from the back of the bramble thicket that made the elders' den. "I dunno, I think these challenges are the most interesting thing to happen to the Clan in seasons!" Ripplecloud sauntered out of the den slowly, his legs looking like they would give out beneath him.

Ambertail stared at the grey tabby incredulously. *He's going mad in his old age!*

Palestride seemed to have the same thoughts. "A young cat *died* in these challenges, you minnow-brain!"

"I know, I didn't say I *liked* the way Streamswirl is choosing the new leader," Ripplecloud defended, collapsing to the ground beside Palestride with a *thud*. "I just think that maybe this could bring the Clan closer together after its all done."

Or tear us all apart because of resentment. Ambertail cast a worried glance at Palestride, who mirrored her expression.

The light grey elder leaned in and whispered in Ambertail's ear. "The old sod is completely mad, I think he may be the oldest cat in the four Clans!"

"Eh! Don't gossip about me. I know you're talking about me, even if I may be going deaf! " Ripplecloud meowed gruffly.

Ambertail pushed down her chuckle, her mood lifted slightly. It didn't last long, however, as she suddenly noticed Streamswirl

emerging from the medicine den, a nervous look shadowing her face.

I really need to talk to her about all of this, Ambertail suddenly thought. *I'm sure most cats agree with Palestride, and we can't risk anyone else dying! She's my friend, she'll listen to me...hopefully.*

Ambertail dipped her head to the two elder toms and pushed herself to her paws, shaking her legs out quickly. Her pelt was still damp, making her shiver when she stepped out of the sunlight. She wanted to try and catch Streamswirl before she announced the next challenge.

Racing over to the white-and-ginger she-cat, Ambertail called out to her. "Streamswirl, I need to talk to you for a moment."

The medicine cat turned around, but didn't make eye-contact with Ambertail. *She's barely looked at me since this all started!*

"Streamswirl, I-"

The medicine cat lifted a forepaw, silencing Ambertail. "I'm sorry, Ambertail, I don't have time to talk right now. It's already sunhigh." She still wasnt even looking at her friend.

"Listen, I know you're under a lot of pressure but-"

Ambertail was cut off again, but this time by Streamswirl growling at her. "You don't know what pressure I'm under!" she snapped, finally locking eyes with Ambertail with a fierce gaze. "I know the Clan hates me, that they blame me for Specklepelt's death, and they wish that I would leave!"

"No, thats not-"

"But what choice did I have? StarClan abandoned me in our time of need!" The medicine cat just wouldn't let Ambertail get a single word in. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to make an announcement about today's challenge." Sadness pierced Streamswirl's green eyes as she looked at Ambertail one last time, before continuing to pad over to the Great Stump.

"Streamswirl..." Ambertail breathed mournfully. *My friend is slipping away from me. She's slipping away from the whole Clan! I'm sure she was wrong though; the Clan doesn't want her to leave RiverClan!*

With a deep sigh, Ambertail made her way to the gathering crowd of cats below the tree stump, realising that many of them were staring at her after her conversation with Streamswirl. She sat down uncomfortably, pretending not to notice their eyes on her.

Streamswirl cleared her throat. "Today's challenge is simple; a race."

Before the medicine cat could get any further into her announcement, Frogskip stood up and raised his voice above hers.

"Now hold on!" he yowled, anger edging his mew. I think we're all starting to get a little tired of these challenges, and I'd like to know; what in StarClan does running fast have to do with being the best leader?"

A few meows of agreement rose up from the crowd, and other warriors nodded along with them.

Streamswirl looked embarrassed for a moment, before raising her head and calling over the challenging mews. "A good leader should always be prepared to quickly lead their Clan wherever they may be going, and should be nimble and light on their feet."

Frogskip still looked unconvinced, challenge in his eyes.

"You're more than welcome to step down from the running to be leader, Frogskip," Streamswirl added contemptuously.

The dark-grey and white warrior sat back down after a few heartbeats, though anger still burned in his eyes.

"Good, then the competitors and onlookers shall follow me down to the lake."

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The group of cats stood at the edge of the lake approximately halfway between where the river intersected with the lake and

where their territory met ShadowClan's territory. Ambertail watched as Streamswirl etched a large line into the ground with her claws. Ambertail couldn't help but shiver, thought she wasn't sure if it was from her cold, damp pelt or anxiety of what this challenge would bring.

Please StarClan, if you're watching over us now, don't let anyone get horribly injured today.

"Competing warriors!" Streamswirl yowled above the growing commotion of the group. "Gather behind this line!"

Ambertail padded forward gingerly, watching the other warriors line up. There were seven cats remaining, including herself; Lizardwing confidently took his place behind the line with Waterheart standing beside him, his chest puffed out. Sprucejump padded forward, apprehension glowing in her eyes, and Frogskip bounded to take his place beside her. Fishpatch flicked his grey tail in Ambertail's face as he walked in front of her. Pinewhisker walked beside Ambertail, his tail brushing against hers as though he were trying to wrap them together. Ambertail's pelt flushed with embarrassment, but she quickly shot the light brown tom a smile, before they both stood behind the line, with Ambertail on the very edge. She could feel her heart racing with nervous energy, which she knew she could use to run faster.

Streamswirl nodded when all seven warriors were lined up. "Right. The race will consist of you all running to the stream that cuts through the territory, and then back to where we are standing now. The first of you to cross this line-" Streamswirl angled her ears to the line she had scored in the dirt- "will be today's winner."

Ambertail couldn't push out the thoughts of how dangerous these challenges were becoming with the warriors turning on each other. *Yesterday, Lizardwing nearly died trying to get rid of me. What else will he do to keep winning these challenges?*

"Are you all ready?" Streamswirl asked the competitors.

They all nodded their heads; Ambertail lowered herself to the ground more to push off her hind legs, as if she were catching a

mouse.

Streamswirl hesitated for a moment, before yowling, "Go!"

Ambertail heaved herself forward as far as she could with a powerful pounce, and pushed her legs to start running. She picked up speed quickly, soon overtaking Sprucejump and Frogskip. Pinewhisker ran beside her for the first few fox-lengths, then pulled ahead of her with an apologetic glance over his shoulder.

I don't have to win, she told herself, *I just need to not lose!*

Ambertail could feel the energy surging through her paws as she hared along the lake shore, but it wasn't long until her muscles started to feel weak and tired. *I'm a RiverClan cat, not a WindClan cat! I'm not trained to run like this!*

The misty air surrounded her, and soon, she couldn't see the other warriors that were ahead of her, just hear the thrumming of their paws. The air was still freezing cold, and her pelt was still damp from her morning training, so she used those as determination to push herself harder.

I'll warm up if I just keep going!

The sound of the rushing stream started echoing in front of Ambertail, and she knew she was nearly at the half-way mark. As she pulled closer to the stream, she could now see the light brown tabby pelt of Lizardwing in front of her; he was slowing down, and she could hear his struggled breathing.

He must still be in pain after yesterday, Ambertail realised as she got closer still to the tom, noticing that he was limping as he ran. Feeling a rush of sympathy, she pushed herself forward and ran by his side.

"Take it easy! Don't hurt yourself anymore!" she struggled out as she breathed heavily. She was surprised when the tabby tom growled at her and ran ahead, his foreleg twisting at an odd angle as he ran.

Stupid minnow-brain! Why won't he listen?

As Ambertail reached the stream, she saw that all the warriors who were ahead of her had stopped to catch their breath. Lizardwing had seemingly collapsed to the ground in his exhaustion, while Fishpatch, Waterheart and Pinewhisker were standing around, heaving and puffing. The hard thumping in her chest told Ambertail that she needed a rest too, so she plodded over to the stream and reached down to lap up the fresh, cool water.

She turned around as she heard more thundering paws, and saw Frogskip had reached the stream as well, and he dropped to the ground, struggling to breathe. *No sign of Sprucejump yet.*

As Ambertail looked around for the older she-cat, she saw that Pinewhisker was walking up to her.

"Good idea," the light brown tom breathed, and leaned down to lap up some water.

"These challenges get more ridiculous each day," Ambertail managed to get out between heavy breaths. "I mean, does she think we're *WindClan* warriors?"

Pinewhisker chuckled after he swallowed his mouthful of water. "Apparently."

Ambertail looked up as she saw more movement; Waterheart gave his pelt a shake, then started a steady run back towards their start point.

"Do you think we should get moving again?" Ambertail asked Pinewhisker, her paws tingling from the run.

The tom took in a deep breath, then nodded.

Ambertail straightened up and, with a shake of each of her paws, took off running again. She could feel her chest was starting to burn, and her throat was tightening, making it hard for her to breath. Every muscle in her body was screaming at her to stop running, but she knew it would be over as soon as she crossed the line as the end. She felt Pinewhisker's pelt brushing against hers as they ran side by side, and like before, he started to pull ahead

slightly. As she kept pushing herself to run, Ambertail finally saw Sprucejump; the dark brown she-cat seemed to be struggling to even walk as she passed them on her way to the stream.

I hope she's okay, Ambertail worried. *Should I go back to help her? No, she's too proud, she can handle herself.* Ambertail couldn't shake the feeling of guilt for not helping the senior warrior, but she barely had enough energy to get herself the rest of the way, let alone help *another* cat all the way back. *I'm nearly there! I can do this!*

Hard paw-steps sounded behind Ambertail, and a moment later a streak of grey flashed past her; she knew it was Fishpatch, who quickly overtook her and Pinewhisker. Through the fog, she could just make out his pelt as he raced ahead of them.

Her paws were starting to ache, and her lungs burned for air as she strained to breathe, but Ambertail could hear her Clanmates cheering ahead of her, she was nearly there! Putting on a last burst of speed, she pushed her legs to move even faster and caught up to Pinewhisker, running neck-and-neck with him. Her Clanmates appeared in the fog ahead of her and after a few more fox-lengths, she crossed to finish line.

The biggest wave of relief crashed over Ambertail, and she crumpled to the ground, her flank rising and falling rapidly. Pinewhisker dropped to the ground beside her, his tongue sticking out as he panted heavily. She was faintly aware of a few cats surrounding the two of them, congratulations coming from all of them. Puddlepaw's dark grey face appeared in front of Ambertail, beaming with pride.

"You did it! And you didn't lose!" he mewed happily, rasping his tongue over his mentor's ears.

"Thanks," Ambertail breathed heavily; she didn't have the energy to respond the second comment Puddlepaw made that made him sound like he didn't have confidence in her to not lose.

"How do you feel?" Driftwater had weaved through the cats to stand in front of Ambertail.

"Like my legs are going to drop off," Ambertail half meowed, half growled. She pushed herself into a sitting position so that the medicine cat apprentice could put his ear to her chest. After a few moments, he pulled away and nodded.

"Your heart's beating very quickly, but your breathing sounds normal, not shallow or raspy," the tabby tom concluded.

Why don't you *try running a race and see how fast* your *heart beats!*

Ambertail turned her attention back to the finish line, where Frogskip had just crossed and Lizardwing was close behind him. She could see the latter was in pain, his face scrunching up with each stride he took. She quickly turned back to Driftwater, who was now examining Pinewhisker.

"Driftwater, you might want to check on Lizardwing," she puffed. "I think he's still hurt."

The tabby rolled his eyes. "That daft furball! He shouldn't have competed after his fall yesterday."

Ambertail nodded in agreement, watching as the young medicine cat strode over to the injured warrior. She quickly looked around anxiously, hoping that Sprucejump was okay, since she still hadn't passed the finish line.

Turning to Pinewhisker, she meowed, "I'm going to go make sure Sprucejump is okay, she looked like she was in pain before."

The tom nodded, so she rose to her paws and trotted back over the finish line and across the lake shore again, hoping to find the senior she-cat soon. The fog shrouded most of her vision, but she could just make out a dark brown pelt in the distance. *Sprucejump!*

Forgetting her tiredness, Ambertail broke into a steady run to meet the warrior, who Ambertail could tell was struggling to walk. She made her way to the she-cat, and quickly stood beside her, helping to support the older warrior's weight.

"Thank you, Ambertail," Sprucejump breathed heavily, "I think I've injured my hind-leg, I can't put any weight on it!"

Ambertail felt sympathetic towards the older she-cat, who looked as though she was about to pass out. "It's okay, you're nearly there."

Sprucejump limped the rest of the way to the finish line leaning on Ambertail's shoulder and wincing with pain. The cats who had come to watch the challenge all crowded around the two she-cats as they crossed the line, worry and anxiety edging their mews. Driftwater bounded over to the two warriors to inspect Sprucejump's leg. The dark brown she-cat lay down on her side to allow him. He stretched her left hind-leg in and out; Sprucejump yowled in pain as he did.

"Hmm, I think you've strained or torn a muscle," Driftwater told her. He looked over to Streamswirl for her to help confirm the diagnosis, but the ginger-and-white she-cat was looking away, not daring to look at any of the disappointed glares of her Clanmates.

Ambertail couldn't help but feel anger rising up inside her. *How could our own medicine cat, my* friend*, let this happen to her Clanmates? If she had just listened to me before...*

Ambertail let out a huff of anger, and turned away to walk back to camp, not waiting for Streamswirl to tell them to leave.

This is getting worse and worse every day! At this rate, another cat is going to die.

Chapter Eight

Ambertail lay curled up in her nest, her nose buried under her brown tail-tip. Her pelt bristled with anger as she continued to think about the previous day's events. After the group returned to camp, Streamswirl announced that Waterheart was the winner of the challenge, and Sprucejump had been eliminated. The dark brown she-cat had spent the rest of that day in the medicine den, where Ambertail heard Driftwater confirm that she had indeed torn a muscle in her left hind-leg. Now Sprucejump was talking about retiring to the elders' den! Ambertail knew that the senior warrior still had many seasons left in her to serve as a warrior, but now she couldn't hunt or fight because of the stupid challenges.

And when I try to talk to Streamswirl about how dangerous these challenges are, she just walks away! Why can't she understand that the Clan is turning on her?

The only warrior that seemed to be genuinely enjoying the challenges was Lizardwing, but after coming second-last in the race due to his injury, he seemed angry and more determined than ever to prove how good of a leader he would make.

Ambertail had gone straight to her nest after another failed attempt to talk to Streamswirl when the group arrived back at the camp, and she suffered another sleepless night because of it. Ambertail still cared deeply for the medicine cat, having been good friends with her since she was an apprentice, but she felt bitter every time she looked at the ginger-and-white cat.

Ambertail focused on Pinewhisker's deep breathing as he slept beside her in his nest, trying to calm herself down. She had given a lot of thought to his proposition to be mates, and she felt more compelled to accept whenever she was with him. He seemed to be the only thing that could calm her nerves lately.

Ambertail looked over at the sleeping tom; he seemed to have slept well after the tiring race, and was still in a deep sleep. Ambertail

smiled lightly and pushed herself to her paws, giving her tail a shake, and quietly padded out of the warriors' den, carefully stepping over her den-mates so as not to disturb them.

She stepped out into the cool, morning air; it was not yet dawn, the sky still darkened and spotted with a couple of stars. Ambertail could see a faint pink glow on the horizon, hinting that sunup was approaching soon. She shook out her thick pelt against the cold, and slowly padded through the reeds to exit the camp. Weariness dragged at her paws, but she knew there was no point going back to her nest as more worrying thoughts would just fill her mind. She knew a walk would help to clear her head and prepare her for the coming day.

As she padded up to the stream, ready to leap across the stepping stones, a flash of ginger fur caught the edge of her vision. She swivelled her head to look upstream, and saw the small shape of Seedfall further along the stream, sitting by the water's edge and peering down into the flowing stream. Curiosity prickled at Ambertail's paws.

What's she doing up so early? Ambertail wondered.

She slowly padded towards the ginger she-cat, trying not to alarm her. "Hey, Seedfall."

The small she-cat jumped in fright, clearly not expecting any other cats to be out of camp.

"Sorry," Ambertail meowed hastily, "I was trying not to scare you, but I guess I didn't do a very good job."

Seedfall smiled weakly. "It's okay, I just didn't think anyone else would be up yet."

Ambertail stood awkwardly for a couple of heart-beats, before sitting down a tail-length away from Seedfall. "So, what *are* you doing out of camp this early?" she queried.

Seedfall looked at her hesitantly, her blue eyes pooled with grief. She sighed. "I haven't been able to sleep since Specklepelt..." Her

voice choked up with sadness, unable to finish her sentence.

Grief gripped Ambertail's pelt; she scooted closer to the ginger she-cat. "Me neither," she admitted.

Seedfall looked up at the older warrior.

"He adored you, you know?" Seedfall smiled. "He thought you were the most amazing warrior in RiverClan, perhaps in all the Clans."

Pride swelled in Ambertail's chest, making her pelt feel warm.

"He always went on about what a great mentor you were, and how he hoped you would be leader one day."

"Really?" Ambertail looked down at the small she-cat, shock rippling through her.

"Oh yeah," Seedfall mewed. "And I can't help but agree with him."

Ambertail said nothing, just kept staring at the young she-cat.

"You were the one that tried to save him that day, and don't think I haven't noticed how much you've been helping the other warriors during these challenges." Seedfall's eyes glowed with admiration. "If you keep that up, you'll *have* to be made leader."

Ambertail felt an overwhelming feeling of fondness for the young warrior; she had never seen this side of her. *I wonder how many other cats of the Clan agree with her about me.*

Seedfall looked back down into the stream, her ginger fur reflected on the surface. Ambertail kept looking at the she-cat, trying to search her eyes for what she was thinking. The young ginger cat looked wistfully into the water, sorrow clouding her gaze once more.

"Watching Palestride and Ripplecloud bury my brother was the hardest thing I've ever done," Seedfall choked out quietly. "He deserved a longer life, a happier life."

Ambertail searched her thoughts for a moment, thinking of what

the right thing to say was. "I know this won't change anything," she began softly, "but I helped bury my brother too, back when I was an apprentice."

Seedfall looked incredulously at Ambertail, sympathy filling her clear blue eyes.

"Birdpaw," Ambertail continued. "That was his name. He never even got to receive his full warrior name." Emotions overwhelmed Ambertail, but she tried to push them down.

"If you don't mind me asking, Seedfall mewed carefully, "how did he die?"

"He drowned."

"Oh..." Seedfall breathed.

"Not long after my mother died, actually," Ambertail added, looking up to the sky where she could see one solitary star left. "He was trying to prove to our father that he was a worthy apprentice, with Splashfall being the deputy and all."

Seedfall nodded with understanding.

"But he was a scrawny apprentice, and not very good at swimming. Splashfall had to drag his body from the water." Ambertail looked down at her paws, scoring marks in the mud with her claws. "That was a long time ago now, you weren't even born."

Ambertail looked up to the sky once more; the sun had broken over the horizon, casting small beams of light over the sparkling stream. She stood up and stretched out her legs. "Come on," she flicked her tail over Seedfall's ears, let's go for a walk."

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As Ambertail and Seedfall padded back into camp after a walk around the territory, Pinewhisker raced toward them, anxiety glittering in his amber eyes.

"Ambertail! Thank goodness!" he sighed with relief. "I've been

looking everywhere for you!"

Apprehension prickled in Ambertail's paws. "Why, what's wrong?" she asked quickly, worried that something dreadful had happened.

"Streamswirl called the meeting early today," he explained in a rush. "Apparently she wants to start today's challenge at dawn!"

Ambertail was somewhat relieved that there was no danger or threat, but a quick glance at the sky told her that the challenge would be starting now.

"Frog-dung! I nearly missed it!" Ambertail exclaimed, giving Seedfall an apologetic glance over her shoulder as she raced to the crowd of cats.

Streamswirl gave the orange warrior a nod as she sat down between Pinewhisker and Swallowflight. "Thank you all for gathering early today," the medicine cat mewed appreciatively. "I decided to start today's challenge early as I fear were going to get a very heavy fall of rain today."

Ripplecloud, who had emerged from the elders' den to listen to the announcement, stuck his head up. "What? Are you a *weather* cat as well as a medicine cat now?"

A few warriors around Ambertail let out snorts of amusement at the elder's comment.

"No, Ripplecloud," Streamswirl meowed impatiently, "I just looked up at the sky and noticed the very dark storm clouds heading our way." She indicated with her tail to said clouds. Ripplecloud rolled his eyes and sunk back down.

"As I was saying." Streamswirl straightened up. "Today's challenge is a breath-holding contest." The medicine cat glared down at the Clan; Ambertail could tell she was waiting for one of them to make a remark about how that doesn't make a good leader. To Ambertail's surprise, however, no one spoke up.

Streamswirl nodded. "Good."

She leaped down from the Great Stump and walked through the gathered cats, flicking her tail in signal for the competitors and any other cats to follow.

Ambertail sighed, but rose to her paws to follow Streamswirl and the others. Most of the Clan came to watch each of the challenges, with a few staying behind to guard the camp. The young warriors were always the most eager to watch the other warriors compete.

Ambertail walked in the middle of the group as they made their way to the stream, observing the other cats around her; Lizardwing and Fishpatch walked confidently at the front of the group, their tails swishing to and fro. Sweetmoss and Wolfwhisper walked to the side of Ambertail, the two queens seemed to be talking about names for their kits.

I wonder if I'll ever be a queen and have kits. Ambertail could see herself as a mother one day, especially if her kits' father was Pinewhisker. A warmth spread over Ambertail's body, making her whiskers quiver. *After all of this is over and we have a new leader, I'll say yes.* Ambertail had finally come to a decision on Pinewhisker's proposition. *We would have great kits together, I'm sure.*

Ambertail stopped when she saw the group dispersing, revealing the stream ahead of her. Streamswirl had jumped onto one of the stepping stones, her tail raised alertly.

"Alright," she began, "all competing warriors, prepare to get in."

Ambertail grumbled inwardly, sick of how often she seemed to be at this stream lately. The morning was still incredibly cold, so she knew the water would not be pleasant. She dipped her forepaw in to test it; it was cold to the touch.

"Do you really think this is a good idea, Streamswirl?"

Ambertail whipped around and saw Driftwater padding forward. This was the first time she had seen Driftwater question his mentor since Troutstar and Splashfall's deaths.

"I mean, couldn't someone get sick? It's the middle of leaf-bare!" The

tabby tom looked genuinely worried, his tail flicking uneasily.

Streamswirl didn't respond, only gave her apprentice a hard stare that made him back away.

She's changed so much! She's nothing like the kind and compassionate cat I used to know...

Ambertail tried to push that thought down, knowing that Streamswirl was still her friend.

Streamswirl eased her gaze. "You will need to hold your breath for as long as you can. The first cat to break above the water is eliminated, the last one will win this challenge. Waterheart-" She turned to look at the black-furred warrior. "You will go in a few heartbeats after them as yesterday's winner."

Waterheart nodded, his fur spiked up along his spine.

"Other competitors, are you ready?"

Ambertail nodded her head as she looked down into the swirling water. *This is going to be a dangerous challenge.*

"Go!"

Ambertail sucked in a deep breath and launched herself into the rapidly flowing stream. *I need to find something to grip onto so I'm not carried away,* she thought hurriedly, already feeling the current whisk past her. She swam deeper down and found a boulder protruding from the streambed, perfect for her to grip. She unsheathed her claws and dug them desperately into the rock. She was faintly aware of a large splash, indicating that Waterheart had entered the water.

I don't need to win this, I just need to not lose. She repeated what she had told herself the previous day. If she tried to hold her breath for too long, she knew she could drown.

The freezing water whipped past her body, making her muscles ache after the strenuous race. Her throat started ache from the lack of air, but she knew no one had resurfaced yet. *Just hold on a little*

longer!

One of her paws suddenly slipped off the rock, sending a shock down her spine as she furiously tried to get her grip on the boulder back. She opened her eyes, trying to make out the blurry shapes around her. She could just make out hints of brown splotched around, but the other grey and black warriors were too dark to see in the dark, churning water. She closed her eyes again as they started to sting. Her chest was burning with the need for air. She knew she couldn't hold on much longer.

Finally, she heard the unmistakable sound of someone breaking above the water and gasping deeply for air. With a rush of energy, she pushed off the boulder with all of her strength and paddled to the surface.

Ambertail drew in the deepest gulp of air she had ever breathed, and quickly paddled to the shore. Cinderstream, who had come to watch, raced over to her and heaved her out of the water by her scruff.

"Thanks," Ambertail panted to the light grey tabby. Cinderstream smiled at her and gave her ears a quick lick in response. Ambertail looked a couple of fox-lengths up the shore to see Frogskip was the one who had resurfaced first, meaning he was eliminated from the competition. He was breathing heavily, water dripping from his dark grey pelt.

Ambertail finally felt the chill of the morning air reach her, so she gave herself a massive shake and began grooming her fur in the opposite direction to warm herself up.

Another gasp from the stream alerted Ambertail; Pinewhisker was coughing and paddling back to shore. He scrabbled to his paws, his light brown pelt clinging to his sides. Ambertail gave a thankful nod to Cinderstream, then bounded over to the tom.

"You look like a salmon," she remarked with a chuckle.

Pinewhisker shot her a mischievous glare, then shook out his pelt, spraying Ambertail with droplets of water.

"Hey!" She cuffed him playfully over the ear.

Another splash of water sounded behind them, and a moment later Waterheart was being pulled out of the water by Toadleap. That meant that only Fishpatch and Lizardwing were left underwater.

Ambertail angled her head towards the edge of the stream for Pinewhisker to follow, and the two of them sat down in front of where the final two cats were.

Wolfwhisper was anxiously sitting at the water's edge, waiting for her mate, Lizardwing, to emerge. Her tail flicked nervously and her whiskers kept twitching.

Ambertail looked over to where she could make out Lizardwing's light brown pelt under the water; he was clinging onto a rock, like Ambertail did. *I hope he's okay.*

Another heartbeat or two passed, and Fishpatch's head broke from the churning river, drawing in a huge gasp of air.

"That makes Lizardwing today's winner!" Streamswirl announced.

Wolfwhisper was still staring at her mate anxiously. "I don't think he heard," she mewed shakily.

Ambertail looked at Wolfwhisper for a moment, then rose to her paws. "I'll go get him," she offered gently, since she was the closest. The dark grey queen nodded her head appreciatively as Ambertail jumped onto the first stepping stone.

Lizardwing was clinging to a rock below the stepping stone, so Ambertail reached her forepaw into the water and tapped the back of the tom's neck. She waited for a moment, and when he didn't react, she tapped him again, this time slightly more roughly to make sure he felt it.

Shock surged through Ambertail as Lizardwing was pulled away by the current, his grip on the rock broken.

"No!" she yowled, and dived into the water without a second thought. The ice cold water sent pain through her body, but she

ignored it and kicked her legs strongly to catch up to the tom. *Why isn't he coming up to the surface?*

Ambertail bobbed her head to breathe in, then dived back under and swam with all of her might to the tabby tom. She finally got close enough to grab his scruff, and she pulled him above the water. Immediately, she realised the tom was hanging in her jaws limply, not taking in any breaths.

No! He can't be dead!

Ambertail desperately kicked out her legs to make it back to the shore, but the weight of Lizardwing made it too hard, and the current kept pulling her downstream.

"Help!" she wailed out through the wet fur in her mouth. She could hear the thrumming of paws racing towards her.

With another powerful kick of her legs, Ambertail managed to get closer to the edge, where Pinewhisker and Toadleap were watching in terror. She heaved Lizardwing as much as she could, and she felt jaws clamp down on her scruff. She held onto Lizardwing as Pinewhisker and Toadleap hauled her out of the water, furiously hoping that he wasn't already dead.

"Move! Move!" Driftwater barged his way past the two toms with Wolfwhisper behind him, yowling out that Lizardwing couldn't be dead.

The tabby medicine cat apprentice pushed Lizardwing onto his back and slammed his paws down on the warrior's chest. He repeated this three more times, before turning the tom on his side and whacking his back with his paws. Bits of water spurted out of Lizardwing's mouth, but he didn't cough or inhale. Ambertail realised with a twist of her belly that his flanks weren't moving.

Driftwater had now put his paw in Lizardwing's mouth and was attempting to scoop out as much water as he could. Ambertail was frozen in place with horror, her neck fur spiking up and tail lashing.

Driftwater slumped down with a look of defeat in his yellow eyes.

"He's gone."

Wolfwhisper let out a mournful wail.

Lizardwing wasn't a nice cat but he didn't deserve this! Why, StarClan?

Ambertail's ears flattened against her head as Streamswirl and the rest of the cats slowly padded towards the mourning queen.

"Oh no..." Streamswirl breathed, a sombre glint in her eyes.

Wolfwhisper whipped around furiously.

"This is your fault!" she cried, stomping towards the medicine cat. "My mate is dead because of your fox-brained challenges!"

Shock was plastered on Streamswirl's face, and she took a step back.

"He died trying to prove what a good leader he would make, because of your fox-heartedness!"

Ambertail winced as the queen threw harsh insults at the medicine cat.

"Now my kits will grow up without their father, and it's *your* fault!"

Wolfwhisper suddenly slashed her claws across Streamswirl's cheek; the medicine cat stumbled back from the force.

Ambertail gasped.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," Wolfwhisper hissed, her hackles raised and ears flattened.

Streamswirl blinked, then slowly rose back to her full height, determination in her green eyes.

"This isn't all my fault," she snarled. "Lizardwing should have come up for breath, I didn't *hold* him down. He should've used his head to *think*!"

Fury flared in Wolfwhisper's eyes, and she raised her paw up again, claws unsheathed, to strike the medicine cat.

"Stop it!" Ambertail yelled, bounding forward to stand between the two cats. She stood protectively in front of Streamswirl, who was now hunkered down to the ground in fear.

Ambertail glowered at Wolfwhisper. "What happened today is tragic, yes, but Lizardwing *should* have come up for breath when he needed. He should have known his limit."

Ambertail glanced at the tom's body, sodden and small.

"And yes, this wouldn't have happened if Streamswirl hadn't created this competition, but it *did* happen. And you will *not* hurt another whisker on your medicine cat! Would your kits want you to become a vengeful creature? Would *Lizardwing*?" Ambertail glared challengingly at the queen.

Wolfwhisper looked between Ambertail and Streamswirl for a moment, then sheathed her claws and slowly lowered her paw. With a growl, Wolfwhisper stalked away, heading back to camp.

The rest of the cats followed her, all shooting furious and sorrowful glares at Streamswirl.

Pinewhisker and Toadleap were carrying Lizardwing's body back to the camp.

Ambertail finally turned to look at Streamswirl; the medicine cat was still cowering to the ground and shaking, fear shining in her eyes. She looked up at Ambertail.

"Thank you," she breathed softly. "I really thought she was going to pounce on me."

"She would've," Ambertail confirmed. "And rightfully so."

Streamswirl looked away.

"Can't you see what you're doing to your Clan?" Ambertail berated. "They're losing faith in you! Every time a cat is injured or dies in one of your challenges, they turn against you more and more! If you don't fix this soon, you're not going to have a Clan that *wants* you, and I won't always be there to protect you."

Without hearing what the medicine cat had to say, Ambertail turned tail and stormed away through the reeds, leaving Streamswirl alone by the swirling water.

Chapter Nine

The weight of Lizardwing's body on Ambertail's back made her drag her paws. Toadleap padded beside her, helping to carry the light brown tabby's body. Palestride and Ripplecloud were walking slowly ahead of them, and Wolfwhisper walked at the rear of the patrol, letting out sorrowful mewls every now and then.

The Clan sat vigil for Lizardwing that night, with his closest friends and kin sharing tongues with him one final time. Cinderstream, who had been Lizardwing's apprentice, had comforted Wolfwhisper deep into the night, while other cats padded drowsily to their nests to get some sleep. Ambertail tried to stay awake for as long as she could, feeling that she needed to reconcile with Lizardwing's spirit after the rivalry they had had during the competition, but after two consecutive sleepless night, Ambertail was pulled easily into sleep.

Having awoken early that morning, Ambertail had offered to help the elders carry Lizardwing's body for his burial.

The four cats padded silently to their burial ground as Wolfwhisper let out a final wail of anguish. Ambertail gently placed Lizardwing down, letting him roll off her and Toadleap's backs, and onto the ground in front of where the elders were digging his final resting place.

Wolfwhisper stepped forward and groomed Lizardwing one last time. "I want him to look his best for StarClan," she whispered.

"Of course," Ambertail mewed gently, placing her tail on the grieving queen's shoulder. Wolfwhisper suddenly looked into Ambertail's green eyes, regret filling her own.

"I also wanted to say...I'm so sorry for thinking you pushed him out of that tree two sunrises ago," the dark grey she-cat apologised. "The way you tried to save him yesterday, well, I won't ever forget that, Ambertail."

Ambertail knew she could never tell the queen the truth about how Lizardwing had tried to push *her* out of the tree, it would be too painful for Wolfwhisper to take.

"It's okay," Ambertail soothed, rubbing her tail along Wolfwhisper's back. They both looked back to the elders; they had carefully lowered Lizardwing's body into the hole they had dug, and were starting to push dirt back over him.

"Let's get back to camp," Toadleap suggested. "Palestride and Ripplecloud know what they're doing."

***

Everyone was gathered at Sunhigh beneath the Great Stump where Driftwater was standing, instead of Streamswirl. Soft droplets of rain were falling on the Clan, but everyone was too curious to take shelter.

Driftwater looked out at the gathered Clan anxiously, his fur standing on end. "I-ugh." He gulped. "I'll be announcing today's challenge, as Streamswirl is tending to Sprucejump currently."

"That's frog-dung!" Toadleap stood up. "She's too ashamed to show her face after what happened!"

Fishpatch and Frogskip both yowled in agreement, while Waterheart and Swallowflight nodded. Ambertail could see Wolfwhisper's slitted eyes as she sat at the edge of the nursery, listening intently.

Driftwater tried to take back control of the situation. "I'm j-just doing what m-my mentor told me to." His stammering mew gave away his nervousness.

Pinewhisker stood up and glared at Toadleap. "We've come this far into the competition, we may as well see it through."

"Easy for you to say, *you're* still in the running!" Toadleap growled.

To Ambertail's utter astonishment, Appleblossom turned to her and asked, "What do you think, Ambertail?"

Toadleap stared at Appleblossom, his mate, with disbelief.

"Well, um..." Ambertail had no clue what to say. "I guess...I-ugh, I agree with Pinewhisker." She looked at the light brown tom, who was beaming at what she said. "We're down to four cats, as long as each of us is careful, and we all look out for each other to keep one another safe, we may as well see what this holds for us. We need a leader, after all."

Appleblossom and Pinewhisker both cheered in support, accompanied by Orangelake, Seedfall and the three apprentices. The rest of the warriors looked around uncertainly, but didn't object.

"It's settled then," Driftwater meowed. "Please follow-"

"Follow me everyone!" Streamswirl emerged from her den, a decisive look on her face.

Everyone exchanged glances with one another, before gingerly following the medicine cat away from camp. Ambertail bounded up to her.

"Thank you for supporting me," Streamswirl mewed gratefully, flicking her tail across Ambertail's flank. "It means a lot to me."

Ambertail felt guilt gnawing at her belly. She could have helped put a stop to these challenges, but instead she knew she needed to show that she stood by her friend, her medicine cat. "Well, after all of this is over, the Clan will still need their medicine cat; I needed to show them that they can still trust you."

Streamswirl let out a sigh of relief.

Ambertail's gaze hardened. "But if anyone dies today, I'm not sure I'll ever be able to stand by you again."

A look of fear flashed across Streamswirl's face, but she nodded in understanding.

***

The lake lapped at the shore as the Clan stood by the water's edge, sunlight glinting off the surface as a soft drizzle continued to fall.

Regret filled Ambertail; she knew today's challenge would turn out to be dangerous, and yet she had still supported the medicine cat. She just needed to make sure nobody got hurt.

"I know that a lot of these challenges have had nothing to do with what makes a RiverClan cat," Streamswirl called out, sitting just in front of the water. "So today's challenge is RiverClan, through and through; swimming."

Okay, that's good. We can handle that.

Streamswirl went on. "The four competitors will start by diving off the halfbridge on our territory, swimming to the halfbridge on ThunderClan territory, and swimming back."

Ambertail gulped nervously. *That's a long swim, even for us!*

Ambertail looked at Pinewhisker fearfully, and he gave her a reassuring nod.

"Fishpatch, Waterheart, Pinewhisker and Ambertail, please make your way to the halfbridge. Fishpatch will get a head start as last round's...winner." Streamswirl cleared her throat uncomfortably.

Ambertail and Pinewhisker padded side by side across the wooden Greenleaf Twolegplace and along the halfbridge, until they stood at the edge of it. The cold air nipped at Ambertail's paws and tail-tip. She looked over at Streamswirl, but the medicine cat looked away.

After a few heartbeats, Streamswirl's voice rang out. "Fishpatch, begin!"

The grey-and-white tom dived gracefully into the lake, splashing the other three warriors.

Ambertail quickly turned to Pinewhisker. "Be careful, okay?"

The tom nodded, and a moment later, Streamswirl called out again for the other three to begin.

Ambertail gave herself a shake, and launched herself off the halfbridge. She ignored the cold water as best she could and paddled to the surface, taking in a deep breath.

Okay, I just need to pace myself. If I tire myself out now, I won't have enough energy to make it back.

Ambertail paddled her legs at a steady pace, allowing Waterheart and Pinewhisker to easily overtake her. She kept her breathing at a regular speed, and soon, she found herself getting used to the cold water.

I really hope there aren't any creatures in this lake, she realised worriedly. *No, it's fine. No animal that lives in the lake would want to eat a cat, anyway.*

Ambertail kept herself calm and continued paddling. Pinewhisker and Waterheart were easily at least ten fox-lengths in front of her, swimming with all of their might, and Fishpatch was so far ahead that Ambertail couldn't see him at all through the mist covering the lake.

This is good, they'll be extremely tired by the time they reach ThunderClan's halfbridge, but I'll have plenty of energy to get back.

Ambertail felt something flick past her leg, and she had to hold back a shrill yowl. She relaxed a moment later. *It was just a small fish, I'm fine.*

The swim to the halfbridge felt like it took moons, but Ambertail finally reached it. Her heart was beating rapidly, but her breathing was steady, and she could still feel energy surging through her paws. As she reached the halfbridge, she could see Fishpatch and Waterheart clinging to one of the wooden logs that stood underneath the halfbridge, and Pinewhisker was holding onto another. She thrust her legs a few final times to make it to the log Pinewhisker was on. He was panting heavily, and his eyes were drooping.

"You can do this, Pinewhisker," she encouraged him.

Pinewhisker kept gasping heavily. "How are...you not...tired?"

"I paced myself," she explained.

She looked over to the other log to see Fishpatch glaring at her. She turned back to Pinewhisker.

"Pinewhisker, listen to me."

He looked up at her, his amber eyes tired.

"You need to get your energy back. I can't have what happened to Lizardwing happen to you. How else could I be your mate after all of this is over?"

Pinewhisker's eyes lit up suddenly. "Really?"

Ambertail nodded. "Really."

A splash alarmed Ambertail; she looked over and saw Fishpatch had pushed off the log with a mighty heave and started swimming back to RiverClan territory.

She looked back at Pinewhisker and gave his cheek a quick rasp, then pushed off the log with her hind legs and dived back into the water. It didn't feel as cold to her now, and she could feel the adrenaline racing through her. Fishpatch wasn't far ahead of her; he was clearly tired as well from his sprint to the first halfbridge.

I can over take him, and then I'll sprint the last half of the way.

Ambertail pushed herself to go slightly faster, but kept her paddling legs at a steady rhythm. Soon, she swam past Fishpatch with ease, who looked like he wanted to growl at the she-cat, but didn't have the energy to. Ambertail was doing well, so well that she could now see the RiverClan halfbridge in the distance with a cat standing on it. She purred happily, and looked over her shoulder to see how far ahead she was from the other three; Fishpatch was about five cat-lengths behind her, Waterheart's black head bobbed further behind him, and...Pinewhisker was nowhere behind him.

Ambertail quickly strained her eyes to look back at the

ThunderClan halfbridge, but Pinewhisker wasn't there either. Her heart rate picked up speed as anxiety crashed over her. Where was he?

Suddenly, a white paw burst from the water a few fox-lengths behind Waterheart.

"Pinewhisker!" Ambertail cried. She immediately turned around and pushed herself to swim as fast as she could, past Fishpatch and Waterheart. Without hesitating, she plunged under the water to where Pinewhisker was slowly sinking, and dug her teeth into his scruff. She yanked them both above the water, Pinewhisker instantly coughing and spluttering.

Thank StarClan he's alright!

"Shtupid fur-all!" Ambertail growled through his fur, her words muffled.

Pinewhisker coughed up a spurt of water in response.

"Do you need any help?" Waterheart called over to Ambertail, his breathing shallow.

"You're too tired!" Ambertail responded. "There's no way you could carry another cat!"

Waterheart was bobbing under the water as he tried to paddle in place; if he tried to help, *he* would drown instead. Ambertail knew she was the only one with enough remaining energy to carry herself *and* Pinewhisker back to shore.

Instead of trying to pull Pinewhisker by the scruff the whole way, Ambertail managed to manoeuvre him partly onto her back, with his head and one foreleg draped over her. "You need to try and paddle, otherwise we'll never get back," she told him. Pinewhisker nodded weakly, and he slowly paddled with his three legs that were in the water.

The two warriors made their way back to dry land slowly but surely, working together to get themselves there. After what felt like an eternity of swimming, they were close enough to the shore

that they could now walk up the bank. Pinewhisker slumped over as soon as he stepped onto the territory, and everyone immediately crowded around him and Ambertail.

"That was incredible, Ambertail!" Tigerpaw gawked.

"You could have drowned!" Puddlepaw added.

Ambertail fought to catch her breath and smiled at the young cats. "Thanks."

Streamswirl was pushing through the crowded cats to make her way to Pinewhisker. She pushed her ear against his chest, and declared that his lungs were clear of water. She turned to Ambertail. "That was very risky what you did out there."

"What was I meant to do?" Ambertail argued. "Let him *drown*?"

"What if *you* drowned?" Streamswirl hissed. "I'd never be able to live with myself."

Where was this sentiment when Specklepelt and Lizardwing died?

Streamswirl looked away, then looked out over the crowd. "There will be two eliminations today. Pinewhisker and..." She glanced at Ambertail. Ambertail could feel her heart skip beat, worried that this had cost her position in the competition.

"Waterheart."

The black tom stepped forward and nodded; he even looked somewhat relieved to be out of the challenges.

Fishpatch strode forward with a low growl. "Why isn't Ambertail eliminated? She and Pinewhisker *both* lost!"

"Ambertail *would've* won, had she not turned back," Streamswirl meowed, a growl forming at the back of her throat. "And Pinewhisker could've died if she didn't. I think it would be unjust to eliminate her for saving a Clanmate, dont you?"

Fishpatch grumbled something under his breath in response,

turning away from the medicine cat.

"That means," Streamswirl yowled, "that we are down to our final two competitors! Fishpatch and Ambertail!"

Ambertail stood still for a heartbeat, dumbfounded that she had actually made it this far. She truly believed that she was going to be eliminated far earlier into the challenges. Pinewhisker, who was now sitting up, wrapped his tail around Ambertail and pushed his nose against her ear.

"I'm so proud of you," he murmured. "Now you just need to actually win."

Ambertail chuckled nervously. "Yeah...win."

***

The moon shone brightly in the sky, which was quite rare for the middle of Leaf-bare. The rain had stopped earlier that day, giving the patrols a good opportunity to hunt when they returned from the lakeside. Pinewhisker had gone back to his nest upon returning, completely exhausted from his near-drowning. Ambertail had joined one of the hunting parties to distract herself from the looming final challenge, but every cat kept asking her questions or congratulating her for it.

"Whatever the next challenge is, I'm sure you'll beat Fishpatch!" Eelfang had said excitedly.

"I don't think it will be another challenge," Swallowflight had interjected. "I think Streamswirl will get us all to vote on who should be leader."

Ambertail had acknowledged them, but had tried not to continue the conversation.

Now Ambertail was sitting in a patch of moonlight, letting it bathe her pelt, turning it a dark grey colour. She watched as someone exited the warriors' den and swiped a thrush from the fresh-kill pile. The cat turned their amber gaze on her, and she realised it was Pinewhisker. He trotted over to her and perched himself beside her,

taking a bite from the thrush.

"Have a good sleep?" she asked him.

He nodded, a feather falling from his mouth. Ambertail laughed as the feather fell onto his paw. He looked down at it, scooped it up with his paw, then set it down in front of Ambertail.

"For your nest," he mewed.

"Thank you so much," purred Ambertail, pulling the feather closer to her with her paw.

Pinewhisker pushed the thrush towards her, and she graciously took a bite of it.

"Did you mean what you said before?" Pinewhisker asked seriously. "About us being official mates after we have a leader?"

She looked at him, a little baffled that he actually had to ask. "Of course I meant it, furball!" she mused after swallowing her mouthful. "Why else would I have risked my tail to save you?"

Pinewhisker purred happily. "As long as you make me your deputy when you become leader!"

Ambertail laughed awkwardly. *That depends on what Streamswirl makes us do tomorrow.*

Ambertail slept well for the first time in three sunrises, with Pinewhisker's tail wrapped around her that night. She was roused at sunup as the warriors started padding out of their den for the dawn patrols. Ambertail stretched her mouth open in a gaping yawn and pushed herself to her feet, smiling at the feather tucked into her moss nest. Pinewhisker followed her out as they pushed their way into the clearing, where Sprucejump was now aiding Driftwater in putting together the patrols. Streamswirl had decided that, since Sprucejump was no longer a warrior, it would be acceptable for her to help Driftwater.

"Toadleap, you lead a patrol with Waterheart, Mistypaw and Swallowflight," the now elder she-cat instructed. "You can check the

ShadowClan border."

Driftwater caught Ambertail's eye. "Ah, Ambertail! Streamswirl wanted me to tell you that you won't be going on a patrol this morning."

"What?" Ambertail meowed. "Why?"

"She wants you at your best for today," the tabby clarified.

"Does that mean I'm not going on any patrols, either?" Fishpatch padded up behind Ambertail.

Driftwater nodded in response and turned back to forming the patrols.

Ambertail exchanged an uncomfortable glance with the grey-and-white tom, until he turned and walked away.

She sighed. *These challenges are making it hard to even talk to our Clanmates! How are we going to treat each other once the leader has been chosen?*

She resigned herself to go back to her nest to catch up on some more sleep; the idea of going out for a training session with Puddlepaw crossed her mind, but she had a feeling Streamswirl would object to that as well. She hunkered down in her nest, Pinewhisker's scent wafting over her for a moment. She willed herself to fall back asleep, trying not to let the anxiety of what was to happen in the final challenge get to her.

What felt like a heartbeat later, Ambertail awoke with a start. A pair of yellow eyes gleamed in front of her.

"It's time for the final round," Driftwater mewed quietly. He sounded just as worried as Ambertail felt.

She slowly padded out of the den, her heart pounding in her chest and her paws tingling nervously. Surely Streamswirl wouldn't make them do something that could risk either of their lives?

As Ambertail emerged from the den, she felt the eyes of the entire

Clan fall on her. *This is the final one, I can do this!*

Fishpatch was standing below the Great Stump, where Streamswirl had just leaped up and turned to face Ambertail. He shot Ambertail a look that was challenging and sympathetic at the same time. She couldn't figure out his feelings towards her in that moment. She padded up to him and sat beside him, looking up at the medicine cat expectantly.

"Fishpatch, Ambertail." Streamswirl looked between the two of them. "You two have fought valiantly throughout these challenges to prove yourselves, and it is time for you to fight valiantly once more."

Oh no, please don't say what I think you're about to say.

"The final challenge will be a battle for the leadership."

Ambertail shot to her feet in alarm, her fur bristling. Fishpatch looked up at Streamswirl apprehensively. Ambertail could hear the Clan moving back, giving the two warriors more space.

"The winner of this final battle will be the new RiverClan leader!" Streamswirl announced to the Clan.

Ambertail felt paralysed as she stared up at the ginger-and-white she-cat; fear and anger surged through her.

"Well? Get into position," Streamswirl instructed.

Shock pulsed through Ambertail as Fishpatch moved back and crouched into an attack position. She looked at him dismally. His expression betrayed that he didn't *want* to go through with this fight, but he seemed ready to do so, regardless.

Ambertail looked back up at Streamswirl. *This is not the Streamswirl I know and care for.*

"No!"

The rest of the Clan looked at Ambertail as she took a defiant step back.

"I am *not* fighting my Clanmate! What kind of leader *would*?"

She turned to face the Clan; some cats looked shocked, but most of them looked overwhelmed with relief.

"This is *not* the way to determine who should lead our Clan, by who is most willing to attack those they should be protecting!"

Streamswirl looked completely taken aback by the orange warrior's outburst. Ambertail faced her again.

"StarClan *trusted* you to decide who the new leader should be, and if this is how you want to choose, I guess I won't be your leader."

Fishpatch looked between Ambertail and Streamswirl, as if asking the medicine cat if that meant *he* was leader.

Streamswirl couldn't utter out a single word, her mouth gaping open in shock. *Did she* really *think I would actually attack Fishpatch?*

"I agree!" a yowl came from behind Ambertail. She turned to see Swallowflight stepping forward, her eyes glinting boldly. "A leader shouldn't step up to fight their own Clanmate, they step up to *help* their Clanmates."

Swallowflight turned and looked at the Clan. "Which is why Ambertail should be our leader!"

Surprise rippled through Ambertail, her green eyes widening.

Streamswirl remained silent, her tail swishing anxiously.

"These challenges *proved* that Ambertail is the best choice for leader, not because she won, but because of her *actions*. She showed empathy towards me during the tree climbing challenge, helping to calm me down."

A warm glow started to spread through Ambertail.

Seedfall took a step forward. "She tried with all of her might to save Specklepelt, which is what a leader should do!"

Swallowflight nodded, encouraged by the younger she-cat showing her support. "And after the scavenger hunt, she helped Lizardwing when he injured himself."

"And me," Sprucejump added, limping forward from the back of the crowd. "She came back because she realised I needed help, even though she was exhausted from the race."

Pride gleamed through Ambertail from ear to tail-tip at how supportive her Clanmates were of her, though she didn't dare look at Fishpatch. To her surprise, even Wolfwhisper stood up.

"She tried to save Lizardwing," she choked out emotionally.

"And she risked her own *life* to save mine," Pinewhisker mewed, looking at Ambertail with affection filling his amber eyes.

Fishpatch sighed beside Ambertail. "She refused to fight me, and I respect that deeply." He dipped his head to show his respect, and, to Ambertail's astonishment, so did the rest of the Clan.

Streamswirl jumped down from the Great Stump. "Ambertail, I...I'm so sorry. For everything I put you- the Clan - through. I, I should have just trusted my instincts, and chosen who I knew would be a good leader." Streamswirl dipped her head to Ambertail.

I can't believe this is actually happening right now. The Clan really wants me as their leader?

"RiverClan," Pinewhisker walked to the front of the Clan. "I think we have our new leader."

Chapter Ten

Ambertail's heart thudded loudly in her chest as she stood at the start of the stone path leading down to the Moonpool. She could still hardly wrap her head around the fact that she was about to become the new RiverClan leader; she could still remember the day she became a warrior like it was only a few sunrises ago. Streamswirl sighed beside her.

"I didn't deserve to go to the Moonpool with you." Streamswirl stared at her paws, guilt flooding her voice.

Ambertail shook her head. "You are still this Clan's medicine cat, regardless of what you did," Ambertail mewed calmly, placing her tail on Streamswirl's back. "It won't help you or the Clan to keep dwelling on the past and wishing you had done it differently, but we will always acknowledge what we went through as a Clan."

Ambertail still felt anger and resentment towards Streamswirl, but she knew she needed to take her own advice and keep moving forward to help her Clan. *My Clan. That sounds so strange.*

Streamswirl looked up and met eyes with Ambertail, before nodding and walking down the stone path.

Ambertail took in a deep breath, calming her nerves, and followed the medicine cat. The winding path seemed to lead on forever in an endless darkness, making Ambertail's anxiety peak again. She made herself control her breathing as she followed Streamswirl down further, and she could feel herself relaxing more and more.

It wasn't long before Ambertail noticed the dim light glowing in front of her, finally lighting up her path, and a few heartbeats later, the narrow path opened up into a much more spacious cavern. Ambertail was awestruck as her eyes adjusted to what she was seeing in front of her; glistening water was flowing smoothly down into the Moonpool from a cleft in the mossy wall above it, and a dim blue light was filling the cavern, giving it a beautiful glow.

"Wow..." Ambertail breathed out.

"It is quite a sight," Streamswirl mewed as she stood beside Ambertail, their pelts starting to touch. The medicine cat sighed deeply, and took a small step away from Ambertail. "I'm so sorry, for everything," she began, her mew soft and pained. "I put the Clan through so much strife, instead of just trusting my instincts to choose someone. I...I thought I wasn't fit to choose the next leader, I don't have any knowledge of deputies and leader qualities."

Sympathy suddenly struck Ambertail as she looked deep into Streamswirl's green eyes, seeing the regret pooling into them.

"I guess I just think so lowly of myself that I didn't believe I had the *right* to choose RiverClan's new leader, so I left it up to the Clan to decide for itself, in a way at least."

Ambertail's whiskers twitched with sorrow when she saw how much remorse and sadness Streamswirl was feeling. She took a step towards the medicine cat.

"Streamswirl, I don't know what I can say to make you feel like you matter, but you *do*. Your Clan loves you- *I* love you- you're one of my closest friends, and you always will be."

Streamswirl looked over her shoulder to look at Ambertail, seeming as if she didn't quite believe her.

"No matter what happens, you will always be my medicine cat, but most importantly, my *friend*. Don't ever doubt that."

Streamswirl finally straightened up, relief flooding over her. She bounded up to Ambertail and rubbed her muzzle against the orange warrior's cheek.

"Thank you, Ambertail," she whispered. "I won't let you down again, I promise."

A contented purr rumbled in Ambertail's chest, and the two friends stood like that for a few more heartbeats. Finally, Streamswirl stepped back and looked down at the Moonpool.

"Right. So all you need to do it lap up some of the water, and lay down beside the pool. Let yourself relax and be pulled into sleep."

Ambertail nodded, finally feeling ready to see what lay ahead of her.

Crouching down, Ambertail lapped up a few mouthfuls of the water; it was crisp and cool against her tongue. She settled down on the cold ground, hoping that her thick fur would keep her warm, and let out a deep breath. She focused on her breathing, and she soon found herself getting drowsier and drowsier, until she was finally pulled into sleep.

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Ambertail's eyes snapped open; she stood in a clearing with a crystal clear stream flowing in front of her, and what seemed like tiny stars pooling out of the water.

"StarClan," she breathed in awe.

"It is indeed, Ambertail."

The orange she-cat whirled around at the voice, to be met with Troutstar's glowing green eyes.

"Troutstar! I've missed you so much," Ambertail choked out as she pushed her muzzle into the leader's cheek. Emotion welled inside her, but she stayed strong. As Ambertail stepped back, she could see all of the majestic cats standing in the clearing, surrounding her. She could feel their love and support as if it were coming off them in waves. There were so many familiar faces and pelts, it was hard for Ambertail to stay focused.

"I have missed you too, my dear Ambertail. You are a fine warrior of RiverClan, I knew I would be seeing you here at some point." Troutstar's eyes gleamed with pride as she spoke, making a lump form in Ambertail's throat from the overwhelming emotion.

As she looked at her old leader properly, she could see how different she looked from the last time they had spoken; she was no longer scrawny and sickly-looking, but was now instead sturdy and

glossy-pelted.

There was still one thing that Ambertail didn't understand, however. "Troutstar," she began carefully, though her tone was becoming angrier, "why didn't you help Streamswirl? Why didn't you tell her who to choose?"

Troutstar looked away, her tail swishing as she searched for the right words. "It was no longer my choice to make, Ambertail. When I joined StarClan, that honour went away. From here, I can see too much. I could not make that decision, for it would not be fair to use my biased knowledge to benefit my own Clan."

Ambertail's head whirled with confusion. "Then, who did you see becoming leader if you chose?"

Troutstar hesitated for a moment, before stepping closer to the orange she-cat. "You, Ambertail. You."

The grey tabby placed her nose on Ambertail's. "I give you the life of wisdom to know right from wrong, use this life to lead RiverClan down the right track and keep them safe."

Suddenly, Ambertail's head seared with pain, as if her head were breaking from the inside. *Is this what it feels like to make hard decisions?* Ambertail wondered as she gritted her teeth together, trying not to focus on the pain. Finally, relief washed over her as the pain subsided, making her feel light-headed.

"It will not always be easy to lead your Clan down the right path, but I trust in you to take care of our beloved Clan," Troutstar mewed, stepping back into the ranks of the other cats of Silverpelt. Ambertail dipped her head respectfully, honouring her previous leader.

A familiar scent washed over Ambertail a moment later, and her breath shuddered as a sleek black pelt emerged from the cats. "Splashfall...father!"

Ambertail closed the gap between them, racing towards the tom she loved so dearly. She pushed her nose deep into his fur, letting his

scent wrap around her. His death remained so clear in her head, but she desperately tried to push it out, letting herself feel his warmth.

"I'm sorry I had to leave you so suddenly, but I am so proud to be able to grant you one of your nine lives," the tom meowed into her ear.

He pressed his muzzle against her head as she remained pressed against his body. "I give you the life of certainty, to always believe in yourself, no matter how hard or challenging the obstacles you face may be. Use this life to instil faith into your Clanmates, so they will always be certain of *you*."

A warmth rushed through Ambertail's body, then suddenly gripped at her paws with strength, as if planting her firmly to the ground. She knew that to be certain in herself, she would always have to stand her ground fiercely, and stand up for her Clan.

As Splashfall moved away, a new cat took his place, one that Ambertail did not recognise; it was a she-cat with a dark brown tabby pelt and glistening golden eyes. The she-cat took long, graceful strides as she stepped towards Ambertail. "My name is Fernstep," she told the orange she-cat. "I was deputy of RiverClan before Splashfall, a position I served with great honour, and I can think of no cat better to lead my beloved RiverClan than his very own daughter."

Ambertail dipped her head respectfully to the tabby, allowing her to place her muzzle on the top of Ambertail's head.

"I give you the life of honouring old Clan traditions made by your ancestors who came before you. With this life, honour StarClan and your own Clan, and let it help you form new traditions, and forge a new path for the future."

This life seemed to flow through Ambertail, like a stream creating a new path over time as it crashes against rocks and dirt. A force as strong as a wave struck her in the chest, nearly throwing Ambertail off her paws, but she stood strong and let the life wash through her. When it was over, she breathed out a heavy sigh, feeling like a weight had been lifted off her chest.

Fernstep nodded at Ambertail, then moved to allow the next cat to take her place. As Ambertail saw who it was, grief tugged at her heart. The lithe, speckled grey tom smiled at her as he padded forward.

"Specklepelt, I'm so sorry," she breathed, almost not able to speak at all.

"You did everything you could to save me," he mewed lightly, "and I will always be grateful for that. You were the best mentor I could have asked for, I just wish I had learnt to control myself better."

The grey tom reached up to touch his nose to Ambertail's, reminding her that he would never have to chance to grow to be a stronger warrior.

"Ambertail, I give you the life of learning from your mistakes. Being leader comes with its challenges, and there will be times that you make the wrong decision. With this life, use your misgivings to better serve your Clan and learn to be the best leader possible."

A strong feeling of guilt swept through Ambertail, causing her heart to race, and a shock of pain coursed through her. She could almost imagine herself standing in front of the Clan, with this feeling of guilt hanging over her from a wrong decision. The pain subsided quickly, allowing Ambertail to catch her breath. Specklepelt let out a purr as he gave Ambertail one last look, before joining the starry cats once again.

Ambertail could feel anxiety building up in her as she waited for the next cat to give her a life; she was shocked when she saw Lizardwing step forward from the ranks to stand in front of her. The tabby tom looked down at the ground as he walked up to her, his tail swishing anxiously. He finally looked up to meet her eyes when he stood in front of her, and he gave her an awkward smile.

"Hello, Ambertail," he greeted her.

Ambertail couldn't quite place the feeling that rose inside her; it felt like anger, guilt and sadness all hitting her at once.

"Lizardwing, I didn't think that you'd...I mean, well, this is unexpected," she blurted out awkwardly, unsure of what she was trying to say to the tom.

Lizardwing chuckled softly. "I wanted an opportunity to tell you that I'm sorry for how I treated you."

A small smile flashed across Ambertail's face; those words felt very meaningful to her.

"And to thank you for trying so hard to save me, even *after* I had treated you like that. I ask that you watch over Wolfwhisper and our kits, for me."

A purr rumbled in Ambertail's chest. She dipped her head to the tabby.

Lizardwing took a step closer, and placed his nose on her head. "I give you the life of forgiveness. No cat is perfect, some *far* from it, and your Clanmates will make wrong decisions along the way. Forgive those who need to be forgiven, and help them find the right way. You must also forgive yourself, not even *you* will always have all of the answers."

Ambertail's heart started to pound so rapidly, she thought it was about to burst right out of her chest. A sharp jolt moved through her chest, down to her tail-tip, and up to her head where Lizardwing's nose rested. He stepped back, and the feeling immediately dissipated. He gave her one last smile, and dipped his head respectfully to her, something Ambertail didn't ever expect to see from him.

A new cat soon stepped in front of Ambertail, another member of StarClan she did not recognise. The red-brown and white she-cat had an air of pride and dignity to her, giving Ambertail the sense that she was a past leader of RiverClan.

"Greetings, Ambertail. I'm glad to be meeting you at last," the she-cat mewed courteously with a small nod of her head. "My name is Acornstar, I served as leader before Troutstar, and I am honoured to help pass the title onto you."

Ambertail gave a curt nod. "It is an honour to meet you."

Acornstar touched her nose against Ambertail's. "I give you the life of appreciating a medicine cat's companionship. As you have learned in these past sunrises, medicine cats may not always have the wisdom and guidance you expect, and learning to trust them again may be hard. But, as leader, your closest companion should always be your medicine cat. With this life, I hope you and your medicine cat may be brought close together again."

This life hit Ambertail with immense pain, as if claws were digging into her pelt all over her body. She wanted to cry out in anguish, reminding her of her anger towards Streamswirl. A burning sensation flooded her entire body, making her face contort in pain, until it was replaced with a soothing feeling, as if she had been washed with herbs to relieve the pain. She breathed a sigh of relief as her pelt cooled, and Acornstar stepped away.

A fluffy grey pelt next emerged from among the StarClan warriors, and Ambertail was met with a face she had not seen in many moons.

"Pikeflash! I don't believe it!" she mewed incredulously.

The tom purred happily. "Ambertail, my dear apprentice! I can see I trained you well, since you're here to receive nine lives."

Ambertail let out a snort of laughter. She had missed her old mentor's sense of humour the most. "Of course you trained me well, I never thought otherwise," she told him.

Pikeflash smiled, and stretched forward to touch his muzzle to her cheek. "I give you a simple life, Ambertail; happiness. Much has happened to you over your life that has caused heartache, and there will be things to come that will cause more. You must take time to allow yourself to enjoy the small things in life, and spread happiness to those around you. A small ray of sun on a cloudy day is enough to warm a cat's heart."

In strong contrast to the previous life, this life made Ambertail's pelt tingle with warmth and comfort, making her want to leap into the

air as it filled her with energy. A warm smile spread across her face, and the tingling sensation remained faintly as Pikeflash moved away, flicking his fluffy tail under Ambertail's chin one last time as he joined his companions.

A small black and white cat bounded forward, coming to a sudden halt at Ambertail's paws. Sorrow gripped Ambertail as she looked into the familiar blue eyes that reminded her of her kitten-hood.

"You're a lot bigger than I remember, Ambertail," he mewed as he stretched to the tips of his paws.

"Birdpaw..." she breathed. "You're a lot stronger looking than I remember."

Birdpaw purred enthusiastically, his tail swishing about. "StarClan has been good for me, I guess."

Ambertail could hardly hold back the emotion tugging at her heart, and she bent down to nuzzle her brother. "I've missed you so much," she mewed softly. "You should have been there to receive your warrior name with me."

Birdpaw wrapped his tail around to brush against Ambertail. "I was with you. In spirit...but yeah, it would've been nice to get my full name!"

Ambertail was so proud of the young cat, that he was still as bubbly as she remembered him to be. She remained lowered down so the small tom could touch his nose to hers.

"I give you the life of determination. With this life, push through the hardships that come your way, and never give up trying, no matter how impossible a situation may seem."

A strong and powerful energy surged through Ambertail, making her fur stand on end. She could see herself racing along a vast expanse of land, her paws thrumming along the ground, her heart pounding, and her Clan racing alongside her, filling her with determination.

She blinked her eyes open as Birdpaw stepped back, allowing

Ambertail to straighten up. "Thank you, Birdpaw," she meowed affectionately.

He let out a soft *mrrow*, then bounded away to stand beside Splashfall.

This is it, Ambertail told herself, *my final life. I wonder who...*

A sweet scent that reminded Ambertail of mist flowing from a gurgling stream surrounded her, making the fur along her spine prick and her paws tingle. The sandy-furred she-cat that stood in front of Ambertail had stars glistening in her pelt, and pride flooding her deep, green eyes.

"It's really you," Ambertail choked out. "Sandyfoot."

Her mother stepped up to her, rubbing her cheek along Ambertail's and wrapping her tail around her. "My darling Ambertail, you have grown into such a beautiful, kind and strong cat. I am so proud of you. I wish I could have been there with you every step of the way, not that you needed me, of course. You've done so well, and I know you will do just as well in this next part of your life."

Sandyfoot pushed her nose into Ambertail's cheek, making Ambertail's face go warm.

"I give you your final life, one of pride, just like the pride I feel for you. With this life, allow yourself to admire your accomplishments, and acknowledge those who have helped you achieve them. Everyone else is proud of you, let yourself be, too."

A warm glow started in Ambertail's cheek that spread across her entire body, from her ears to her tail-tip. She felt it radiating everywhere, to the ends of each of her hairs and the tips of her claws. It filled her with a fire-like energy, and she ached for her mother's touch as Sandyfoot moved her muzzle away from Ambertail's cheek.

Ambertail looked around at all the starry cats that surrounded her, feeling honoured to be among them

Troutstar padded forward once again. "It is complete. I hail you by

your new name, Amberstar. Your old life is no more, you have now received the nine lives of a leader, and StarClan grants you guardianship of RiverClan. I know you will serve it well, and make us all proud. Go well, Amberstar, for we are all with you."

The StarClan cats raised their voices to chant, "Amberstar! Amberstar!"

Amberstar's paws tingled to hear her new name called out; she never really expected to be here, receiving nine lives and being renamed to be leader, but she was proud to have been chosen. She knew she would make her Clan proud.

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Amberstar gave Streamswirl a reassuring flick with her tail as the two cats padded towards the entrance of the camp.

"It'll be okay, Streamswirl. We'll get through this together."

The medicine cat gave a half-hearted smile, though she didn't say anything.

Amberstar was also quite worried about what the Clan would say, or do, to Streamswirl, but she wasn't going to let the medicine cat know that. She had to be strong now, for her whole Clan, and for herself.

She took a confident breath in, and walked into camp, Streamswirl following closely behind her. The RiverClan cats were all waiting in the clearing, and they all immediately jumped up when they saw the two she-cats entering the camp. Everyone started to surround her, but clearly everyone was too timid to be the first to speak. Finally, Pinewhisker stepped closer to Amberstar.

"Welcome back, *Amberstar*," he mewed, a wide grin growing on his face. "Did everything go well?"

Amberstar chuckled. "Now, now, Pinewhisker, you know I can't discuss what happened at the Moonpool. That's strictly between me and Streamswirl."

Amberstar pushed through the rest of the crowd until she was standing in front of the Great Stump. She hesitated for a moment, feeling slightly unsure; she was so used to Streamswirl leaping up onto the Great Stump to make announcements, that doing it now herself almost felt wrong in a way.

She shook her head to clear the thoughts, and jumped up. As she turned to face the Clan, she saw that they were all already sitting and eagerly waiting for her.

I don't even know where to begin!

She cleared her throat. "RiverClan, it is an honour to be standing up here as your leader, and I hope that we can all come together and put these past sunrises behind us. We will always honour those that we lost, but we will honour them by becoming an even stronger RiverClan!"

The Clan erupted into loud meows and cheers.

One voice that Amberstar picked up as Pinewhisker's began to shout, "Amberstar!"

Soon, the rest of the Clan followed his lead, and the whole camp was cheering, "Amberstar! Amberstar!" in unison.

A warm sense of pride rippled through Amberstar to see her Clan being so encouraging towards her.

"Now, it is time I-"

"Wait just a minute!"

Amberstar was shocked as Wolfwhisper stood up and yelled over her, the queen's eyes filled with fury.

"I hope you don't all think that we can continue to have Streamswirl as our medicine cat?" Wolfwhisper growled, her eyes raking across the whole group of cats, finally stopping on Streamswirl.

The medicine cat, who was standing at the back near the medicine den, looked just as taken-aback as Amberstar, and worry started to

cloud her gaze.

Wolfwhisper turned back to face the new leader. "She caused the death of Specklepelt *and* Lizardwing! She cannot continue to be our medicine cat, she has disgraced RiverClan!"

Amberstar looked at all of the warriors, trying to gauge their reactions; most of them seemed unsure of the situation, but a couple looked like they were about to agree with Wolfwhisper.

The queen continued. "I say we *banish* Streamswirl! She should live as a rogue for what she's done!"

To Amberstar's horror, Fishpatch and Frogskip both stood up, fur bristling, and yowled out their agreement.

"Lizardwing and Specklepelt deserved better!" Fishpatch growled, casting a furious glare at Streamswirl, who was now hunkered down to the ground in fear.

"What do *you* think, Seedfall? It is your brother who is dead, after all," Wolfwhisper snarled as she took a step towards the small ginger she-cat.

Seedfall's eyes went round with shock, and she stuttered for a moment. "W-we shouldn't k-kick Streamswirl out..." she mewed softly. "Specklepelt wouldn't want that," she added more confidently.

Wolfwhisper looked slightly shocked at the young warrior's response.

"That is enough!" Amberstar yowled above the growing commotion. She glared at Wolfwhisper. "It is not up to you to decide what happens to our medicine cat, that is now *my* responsibility. I will *not* allow you to threaten her like this. We must move past what has happened to us, but I'm not saying we should forget, just that we should forgive. What kind of Clan would we be if we divided ourselves like that?" Amberstar looked over her entire Clan, making sure each and every one of them got the message.

"But I-" Wolfwhisper went to argue, but Amberstar cut her off before

she could.

"However, I think it is important to acknowledge that Streamswirl's decisions were far from acceptable," Amberstar mewed carefully, looking at the white-and-ginger she-cat, who nodded her head in agreement. "There will be no banishment, but I think Streamswirl should step down as medicine cat for one moon, that way everyone can come to terms with their feelings and with what has happened to us all."

Before anyone could say anything, Streamswirl stepped forward and raised her voice. "I accept. I need to face the consequences for my actions, and if this will help me become a better medicine cat in the future, I accept."

Amberstar smiled encouragingly at Streamswirl. "Thank you. For the next moon, Driftwater will be our acting medicine cat."

The dark brown tabby, who had been standing beside Streamswirl, dipped his head respectfully to the leader.

Amberstar looked back over at Wolfwhisper; she still looked resentful, but sat down without another word.

"Now, it is time I appointed my deputy," Amberstar declared to the Clan. "These have been very strange times, and I hope that no Clan will ever be unfortunate enough to go through the same thing again, but I know that my deputy must be someone that I trust to help the Clan through difficult times, someone who helped to support me through it. Pinewhisker, please step forward."

The light brown tom nearly jolted in surprise, his eyes filling with shock. He looked around for a moment, then stood and padded forward.

Amberstar smiled at the tom. "I say these words before StarClan, so that our warrior ancestors may hear and approve of my choice. The new deputy of RiverClan is Pinewhisker. I know that you will honour this Clan well."

Pinewhisker beamed with pride as he turned to face his Clan, who

were chanting his name to the sky.

Amberstar jumped down from the Great Stump, landing beside her new deputy. "I think it's time everyone got some rest," she called out so that everyone could hear, and soon, the Clan dispersed to their dens for some much-needed sleep.

Once they were alone, Amberstar looked up into Pinewhisker's amber eyes. "I might take you up on that offer to be mates."

Epilogue

[image]

Amberstar stood in front of the Great Stump, repeating the words she would soon need to say over and over again in her head.

My first naming ceremony as leader. It will all be fine, I know what I'm doing.

Amberstar had been the leader of RiverClan for nearly two moons, and so far, it had all gone smoothly, aside from the occasional glare from Fishpatch or Wolfwhisper, though Amberstar felt she was finally on good terms with everyone in the Clan.

Pinewhisker stood beside Amberstar, and quickly gave her a reassuring lick on the cheek.

"It'll be okay, you've seen Troutstar do this plenty of times," he mewed encouragingly. Amberstar nodded confidently, and leapt up onto the Great Stump.

As Amberstar looked out over the camp at her Clanmates, a nervous feeling wormed its way through her stomach, making her feel sick. *I don't need to feel nervous,* she told herself, *so why do I?*

"Let all cats old enough to swim in the stream gather for a Clan meeting!" Amberstar's voice rang out across the camp. Her Clanmates began to make their way into the clearing to sit in front of her; she could see Appleblossom and Toadleap at the back giving Mistypaw, Tigerpaw and Puddlepaw one last grooming, before the three apprentices all bounded to the front of the crowd.

The same nervous and sickly feeling hit Amberstar in the stomach again as she looked at the three eager cats. She tried her best to push the feeling away, and just focus on the ceremony she was about to perform.

"Ravenkit! Get back here!" Sweetmoss's yowl distracted Amberstar,

and she could see the cream-coloured queen racing after her small, black kit.

"But I want to watch as well!" the little she-kit mewed back to her mother, running up to join the crowd of cats. The Clan all let out amused purrs as the little kit began to weave through them, being chased by her mother.

"You're not old enough, you need to get back to the nursery with Cloudedkit and Sootkit," Sweetmoss told her kit as she finally caught up to her, and grabbed the kit's scruff.

"But Sootkit smells funny! And she keeps coughing, it's annoying!" Ravenkit rebuffed, kicking her legs as she was carried back to the nursery.

Amberstar let out a small chuckle, then turned back to face the waiting Clan. "Well, now that we're all ready, let's begin."

She cleared her throat, and desperately hoped that she remembered all of the words.

"I, Amberstar, leader of RiverClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these three apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn."

Amberstar looked down at the three apprentices; Mistypaw's tail was held upright with anticipation, and Tigerpaw and Puddlepaw both had eyes wide with nervousness.

"You have all been trained well." She nodded to Waterheart and Fishpatch in acknowledgment, then continued. "Do you three promise to uphold the warrior code, and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your own life?"

Mistypaw immediately jumped up. "I do!" she meowed confidently.

Tigerpaw and Puddlepaw both stood up eagerly after their sister, and said, "I do."

Amberstar smiled proudly. "Then, by the powers of StarClan, I give

you your warrior names. Mistypaw," she looked down at the light grey tabby. "From this moment on you will be known as Mistyclaw. StarClan honours your independence and strength, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan."

Mistyclaw beamed with pride, her tail swishing back and forth.

"Tigerpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Tigerwing. StarClan honours your dedication and enthusiasm, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan."

Tigerwing looked at his sister proudly, puffing out his chest.

"And Puddlepaw," Amberstar looked down at her own apprentice, pride swelling in her chest. "From this moment on you will be known as Puddlefoot. StarClan honours your kindness and loyalty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan."

Puddlefoot looked up at Amberstar and gave her a respectful nod, a wide smile spreading across his face.

Amberstar jumped down from the stump, and placed her muzzle on each of the new warriors' heads, and each of them gave her shoulder a respectful lick. Behind them, the Clan began to chant their new names.

"Mistyclaw! Tigerwing! Puddlefoot!"

Puddlefoot quickly leaned forward towards Amberstar. "Thank you for everything," he mewed softly. "You were the most amazing mentor, and I *knew* you'd be a great leader."

Amberstar smiled at the young tom, and gave him a grateful lick between the ears, before he bounded away to join his litter-mates in being congratulated by the rest of the Clan.

As Amberstar looked on at the happy young warriors, her stomach twisted again, sending a dull pain through her body. *This is ridiculous! I don't feel nervous anymore, so what in the name of StarClan is happening to me?*

"Well that went well, I told you there wasn't anything to worry

about," Pinewhisker meowed humorously as he padded up to Amberstar.

"Yes, yes, I know," she mewed, "I worry too much. And right now I'm worried that I'm getting sick. I can't shake this sickly feeling in my stomach," she told her mate.

Pinewhisker's amber eyes widened with worry. "Maybe you should speak to Streamswirl about it, we have just come out of Leaf-bare, after all. Maybe you caught something?"

Amberstar nodded. "I must have. I'll speak to Streamswirl, you sort out any patrols that need to be sent out."

Pinewhisker dipped his head, then turned away to face the other warriors.

Amberstar took in a nervous breath, and padded over to the medicine den. She pushed her way through the thorn bush, and saw Streamswirl standing over the small pool, dipping her paws in. Amberstar cleared her throat to get her attention.

"Oh, Amberstar!" Streamswirl whipped around. "Sorry, I didn't see you come in. Great job with your first naming ceremony, by the way," she added.

"Thank you, but I need to talk to you about something else, not leader advice." Amberstar could feel her heart start to race with worry. "I think something's wrong with me; I feel sick, and it feels like I have a painful lump in my stomach. I thought I was just nervous but-"

"You're probably pregnant," Streamswirl cut in, not letting Amberstar finish.

Shocked pulsed through Amberstar, making her sit down as she started to feel slightly light-headed. "What?"

Streamswirl chuckled. "It sounds like you're expecting kits. Those are very normal symptoms of it." The medicine cat padded up to Amberstar and placed her paw on the leader's belly, pushing into it. "Yep. Congratulations! You've got kits on the way."

Kits?! Are leaders even allowed to have kits? How is Pinewhisker going to react?

As if reading her mind, Streamswirl added, "Don't worry, plenty of leaders have kits and continue on with their duties. You'll be fine."

Amberstar looked down at her belly. "I can't believe it, I'm going to be a mother!" She couldn't tell if she was terrified or excited, or both. "I need to tell Pinewhisker!"

Amberstar quickly jumped to her paws and raced out of the den.

"Pinewhisker!" she called out to the deputy. He turned around to face her.

"So what's wrong?" he asked expectantly.

"Well, nothing!" Amberstar mewed happily. "Just the opposite in fact; I'm going to have kits!"

Pinewhisker went completely silent, his jaw gaping open in surprise. Finally he found his voice again. "Wait, *really?*"

"Yes of course, you furball." Amberstar cuffed him playfully over the ears. "Why would I lie to you?"

"Wow, that's just...wow!" Pinewhisker gazed at her affectionately, his eyes full of love.

Amberstar wrapped her tail around Pinewhisker as she pushed her muzzle into his cheek.

Whatever the future holds for me, I'm ready for it.